

SELENA GOMEZ / ST. VINCENT / PLAYBOI CARTI / ERIC CHURCH / KAROL G

Rolling Stone

APRIL 2021
ISSUE 1350

SPECIAL REPORT

Fighting the Climate Crisis

Inside Biden's Team: Our Last, Best Hope

Generation Covid

A Year in Limbo With the Class of 2020

John David Washington




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John David Washington, photographed in Los Angeles on February 28th, 2021, by **Dario Calmese**.
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“Kacey Musgraves is on the cover of the new ‘Rolling Stone.’ If you haven’t heard her music yet, this is your cue. Your life will be better for it.”

—Eric Alper, via Twitter



When Anti-Vaxxers Meet QAnon

“How the Anti-Vaxxers Got Red-Pilled” [RS 1349] is a one-stop tour de force for understanding the misinformation plague happening in our country.

—Kevin Smith, via Twitter

Cynicism about institutions and expertise leads to conspiratorial thinking, whether you’re into anti-vax or QAnon...or both. Great long read from Tim Dickinson.

—Andrew Rosenblum, via Twitter

Conspiracy nuts and anti-vaxxers are partly the reason we’re still struggling to get this thing under control. It’s sad how far as a people we have fallen.

—Nate Dorney, via Facebook

After the Golden Hour

For ROLLING STONE’s third annual “Women Shaping the Future” issue, Kacey Musgraves appeared on our cover for the first time. Coming off of her recent divorce, the country singer opened up to senior writer Alex Morris about the healing, songwriting, and magic-mushroom trips that have gone into reshaping her path forward — and the making of her new Greek-tragedy-inspired album set for release this year [“Rebirth of Kacey Musgraves,” 1349]. Naturally, our readers had much to say. “This is incredible. So well written, and so good to hear her perspective on this new chapter,” wrote reader Evan Gravelle. “Her spirit is truly something,” McKayla Jend said. “How and where does one take this

guided mushroom trip? Inquiring minds want to know.” Candice Bomb spotted the influence of a country legend: “Is it me or does she look like a young brunette Dolly Parton right here?” Jaqueline Westman tweeted, “She’s still grounded, even with all the BS she’s been through. Still our Kosmic Kween.” Brandy Cain wrote, “Kacey dropping some absolute gems in this interview. She’s got another classic on her hands.” Others also had their minds on the new album. Travis Caballero tweeted, “Can’t wait to hear Kacey Musgraves’ version of *Blood on the Tracks*.” Some fans are already feeling emotional about it. “This one is going to rip me apart,” wrote Mike Ross. “I might as well accept it.”



@ericareads
queer: A new
Kacey Musgraves
album in
2021? Hell yes.
I cannot wait!



Artists Talk Icons & Influences

I grew up listening to Nina Simone, and she has always been such a huge influence. So happy to be able to talk to ROLLING STONE about her and what makes her so special to me [Icons & Influences, RS 1349].

—Brittany Howard, via Twitter

The Indigo Girls were ahead of their time and deeply important to LGBTQ exposure; this tribute and personal history about mentorship, friendship, and human character is beautiful and overdue.

—Daniel Louis Dun, via Twitter

INSIDE THE STORY

A Year With Generation Limbo

Despite growing up to believe that a college education would help secure a brighter future, that has not proved to be true for the class of 2020, who graduated into Covid-19 and a recession. Over the past year, ROLLING STONE senior writer EJ Dickson spoke with dozens of recent graduates to understand their unique predicament. “I was most struck by the enduring optimism of the subjects I spoke with,” says Dickson. “They had every right to be deeply embittered about the cards they were dealt, and by and large, they really weren’t. They were pissed off (and rightfully so), and realistic about their prospects, but they still maintained hope about their futures. And I think that as we near the end of this pandemic, but are still very much caught up in its throes, that’s a valuable lesson for people to take to heart.”



LOCKED DOWN Recent college grad Andrew Garcia-Bou at home in New York

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the mix

WHAT'S NEW, WHAT'S NEXT, WHAT'S NUTS

St. Vincent's Family Ties

*Rock visionary turns to Seventies
sounds to process her father's
white-collar prison experience*



PHOTOGRAPH BY Erik Carter | 11

BOOK

Empty Clubs Need a Hand



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AS THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC continues, many venues that were once filled with people are struggling to remain open. *Bring Music Home* – written by former ROLLING STONE events head Amber Munding and Tamara Deike, with art direction by Kevin W. Condon – documents the crisis with photographs of more than 200 empty venues across the country, and more than 375 interviews. A portion of the profits will go directly to the National Independent Venue Association, which has lobbied Congress for much-needed relief for venues. “We wanted to save something we saw early on as so vital to our culture and yet so very vulnerable,” Munding says. Adds Condon: “I’m just terrified of watching venues wither, and I truly hope it doesn’t happen. I hope that this book does something to remind people they can help.” **ANGIE MARTOCCIO**



▲ KINGS THEATRE, BROOKLYN

The team at the ornately refurbished theater, says Munding, is led by a group of “amazing women [who] support the Flatbush community fiercely.”

► HEIGHTS THEATER, HOUSTON

“We had a T-shirt made, and all proceeds went to staff who were out of work,” writes events manager Adrienne Joseph.



➔ ST. VINCENT

ONE OF THE last times Annie Clark went to see her father in a Texas prison, a fellow visitor asked her to autograph a receipt – the only paper they had on hand. “You can’t bring phones in, so you can’t take a normal selfie. I guess I’m glad that a selfie of me in there doesn’t exist,” Clark, 38, says. “I find it very darkly comic. It’s obviously very sad, but it’s also incredibly funny.”

Clark saw her father taken away by the U.S. government in May 2010 for what she describes as “white-collar nonsense.” Over

the next near-decade, she visited him in between releasing four albums of increasingly acclaimed art rock as St. Vincent. She performed with Nirvana at the 2014 Rock & Roll Hall of Fame induction ceremony...and was forced to go to Walmart more than once to buy XXL sweatpants when the prison deemed her clothing too tight for a visit. She won Best Rock Song at the 2019 Grammys...while the massive collection of books she brought for her dad to read behind bars was confiscated and replaced with various editions of the Bible. Now, two years after her father was finally released, she’s making sense of it all on her seventh studio album, *Daddy’s Home*.

FAST FACTS

WAITING ROOM

Clark recalls meeting UFC fighter Kamaru Usman, whose dad was in the same prison.

IN HARMONY

The new LP features backup vocals from Lynne Fiddmont and Kenya Hathaway — a first for St. Vincent.

If her 2011 breakthrough, *Strange Mercy*, reflected the “pain and ambivalence” of her father’s arrest, as she writes in a comic that accompanies the new album, then *Daddy’s Home* is about coming full circle. Zooming in to chat about the record, Clark has ditched the super-streamlined aesthetic that accompanied the sleek pop of 2017’s *Masseduction*, instead opting for a headscarf and Seventies-style tinted glasses.

“I think that with my last record, I had gone as far as I could in a certain way with fly-out-of-the-speakers-and-grab-you-by-the-throat kinds of sounds,” she says. *Daddy’s Home* feels more human and lived-in, with

FROM LEFT: KEVIN W. CONDON; JULIAN BAJSEL



▲ BOOTLEG THEATER, L.A.

"You could feel the magic in the room even with absolutely no one else around," producer Daniel Oakley says of the hip warehouse venue.

▼ NEIGHBORHOOD THEATER, CHARLOTTE, N.C.

"The message on the marquee is something we all feel," says photographer Justin Smith.



▲ THE STONE PONY, ASBURY PARK, N.J.

"It's beyond flattering to have somebody like that come on board to help," Condon says of photographer Danny Clinch.



▲ MAJESTIC THEATRE, SAN ANTONIO

"I remember thinking about the countless concerts that have been ongoing for the past 90 years and suddenly came to a dead stop," says photographer Oscar Moreno. "There was this eerie silence throughout the theater — not your normal silence of an empty venue."



▲ BOWERY ELECTRIC, NEW YORK

"We all grew up down here, going to hardcore matinees, drinking 40s on the street," Jesse Malin, musician and co-owner of the downtown venue, writes in the book. "I don't think I've ever met a more New York musician," Condon says of Malin.



FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: DANNY CLINCH; POONEH GHANA; KEVIN W. CONDON; OSCAR MORENO; JUSTIN SMITH

echoes of Bowie, Sly Stone, and other Seventies artists. That era, she says, was "post-flower-child idealism, but it's pre-disco. It's this period of time that I feel like is analogous to where we are now. We're in the grimy, sleazy, trying-to-figure-out-where-we-go-from-here period."

Clark found the album's sound while working with producer Jack Antonoff in New York before the pandemic began. "I was walking down the hall at Electric Lady Studios with Jack," she recalls, "and I was like, 'I want to make this down-and-out, downtown kind of record.'" Antonoff then sat down at the studio's Wurlitzer to record "At the Holiday

"We're in the grimy, sleazy, trying-to-figure-out-where-we-go-from-here period," Clark says of the new sound she's found for 2021.

Party," which recalls a woozy catch-up with a washed-out star. "I was like, 'Yeah, this is it,'" she says. "These sounds are warm, and they're literal, and they're evocative."

New York is a main character on the record — the mysterious Johnny, a rough-and-tumble friend whom she's mentioned on several past albums, makes an appearance as "Bowery John" — but Clark's part-time home of L.A. turns up too. On the psychedelic "The Melting of the Sun," she muses on women who have been crushed or otherwise mistreated by the entertainment industry, Joni Mitchell and Marilyn Monroe among them. "People tried to quiet them when they were saying

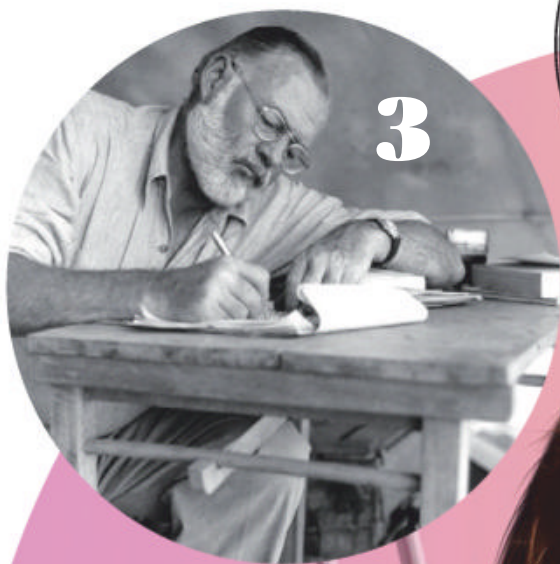
something that was righteous or true or hard to hear," Clark says. "[That song] in particular is a love letter to strong, brilliant female artists. Each of them survived in an environment that was in a lot of ways hostile to them."

Daddy's Home is an album that's teeming with life and loss, backup singers and brass sections — which, naturally, leaves Clark dreaming about how it will all work onstage, whenever touring is possible again. "The last record and the tours I did were full multimedia assaults," she says. "[This time], I will be excited to just play. Just people onstage playing music and killing it, without all the spectacle." **BRENNA EHRLICH**

RS RECOMMENDS

OUR TOP POP-CULTURE PICKS OF THE MONTH

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7



5



6



MEMOIR

1. 'Crying in H Mart,' by Michelle Zauner

In 2014, Zauner lost her mother to cancer, inspiring two Japanese Breakfast albums. Now, she continues prodding her feelings of "heavy darkness, confusion, and loneliness" in written form.

TV SHOW

2. 'Law & Order: Organized Crime'

After leaving *Special Victims Unit*, wisecracking Detective Elliot Stabler trades the sex-crimes beat for something a little less gut-wrenching.

DOCUSERIES

3. 'Hemingway'

Ken Burns and Lynn Novick deconstruct the writer's mythology. Much of it holds up (He fished! He hunted! He really liked bullfighting!), but underneath there's a tragic, often toxic figure who harbored complicated relationships with women, writing, and his own celebrity.

DOCUMENTARY

4. 'Sisters With Transistors'

Narrated by Laurie Anderson, Lisa Rovner's new film on the origins of electronica explores women like Delia Derbyshire — the *Dr. Who* theme-song creator who was inspired by the London air raids of World War II.

MEMOIR

5. Brandi Carlile's 'Broken Horses'

Despite her being under 40, the star singer-songwriter's memoir is filled with a lifetime of stories, with moving tales from her Seattle busking days to insights on queer motherhood, resulting in a thoughtful portrait of an artist reflecting on her life at the height of her career.

ALBUM

6. Morgan Wade's 'Reckless'

The debut album from this 26-year-old Virginia singer-songwriter is a moving mix of country-roots and 1980s radio rock; think Lucinda Williams meets Joan Jett.

BOOK

7. 'The Last Soul Company'

Malaco Records — home to artists like Mississippi Fred McDowell and Bobby "Blue" Bland — is the longest-running independent label in America. Rob Bowman's meticulous history finally does it justice.

PODCAST

8. 'Listen to Sassy'

From 1988 to 1994, Sassy offered third-wave feminist takes for teens like "The Truth About Boys' Bodies." This new podcast looks back on the

influential magazine and the style, beauty, and pop-culture trends of its time.

EXHIBIT

9. 'Not Another Second'

The 12 inspirational LGBT+ subjects in this virtual show have collectively spent 485 years in the closet. Their stories start before Stonewall, and continue with a feisty refusal to hide who they are.

ALBUM

10. Dawn Richard's 'Second Line: An Electro Revival'

The visionary R&B artist's latest album is a kaleidoscopic tribute to New Orleans, with futuristic club beats and deep funk rhythms blending into the party of the century.



For reviews, premieres, and more, go to [Rolling Stone.com/music](https://www.rollingstone.com/music)



Real-life advice from a guy who's seen, done, and survived just about everything

What was it about the Sixties that made the music so magical? Was it just that I was young and everything in the world felt new and magical, or was there truly something special about that time?

—Steve, TX

There are periods in history when art blossoms. There's the Renaissance in Italy. There's the Thirties in Paris' Left Bank. Around that time, you see a crowd that wasn't there before and wasn't there after. That happened again in songwriting in the Sixties and Seventies. There was a peak of songwriting. Bob Dylan, Joni Mitchell, Paul Simon, Paul McCartney, Randy Newman, and others inspired it. They made us love good songs, and it was a very rich period.

I'm a 17-year-old guitar player and my taste in music is all over the place. I'm just as much in love with the blues as I am with folk and as I am with indie music. Is it OK for me to be all over the place? Should I pick one thing and leave my other interests behind?

—Tim, MN

No. You should not put your other interests behind. The widest possible scope of music you can listen to is going to help you the most. Aside from opera, I listen to everything: country, folk, jazz, classical, singer-songwriter, pop. If you want to be a musician, you really should listen to as many kinds of music as you possibly can. That's a very healthy thing.

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SPOTLIGHT

Reinventing Karol G

Covid slowed her down, but the Colombian reggaeton star bounces back with new sounds

LAST MARCH, the Colombian singer Karol G was just weeks away from finalizing an album she'd been working on for months. Then, sitting at home in Miami one afternoon, she realized something was missing: "I said, 'No. I need to start over.'"

When the pandemic hit, it gave her time to do just that. Karol, 30, studied what she loved about her favorite

pop acts — Beyoncé's airtight production, Rihanna's natural delivery, Lady Gaga's wild aesthetics — and tried producing for the first time. But Covid also presented new challenges. "I felt like I had lost my moment," she says. Then, over the summer, she and her assistant came down with Covid-19.

One way she got through it all was by watching the videos friends sent her of quarantined people around the world singing her 2019 smash "Tusa" from their balconies. Karol was so moved when she saw the first one that she cried. "I was

like, 'I'm Karol G, the one with the superhit!'" she says. "I need to bring this attitude into everything I do from now on!"

After recovering, she finished an all-new album on which she embraces fresh genres and sounds like never before. The first single, "Location," features her boyfriend, the Puerto Rican rapper Anuel AA, and J Balvin singing over a country-inspired riff. "I'm not making all these fusions so that my music reaches a ton of people," she says. "I love all types of music. That's what I want to express." JULYSSA LOPEZ



Karol G in Medellín, Colombia, February



HAIR BY SIMON ATERHORTUA;
MAKEUP BY DUVAN FORONDA;
STYLING BY KAREN RAMIREZ
AND DAIRY GAMBIO

ARTIST YOU NEED TO KNOW

Arlo Parks’ Mellow Neo-Soul Gold

THE 20-YEAR-OLD poet and singer Arlo Parks started releasing music as a teenager, courting blog interviews in between her final exams. Parks, who was raised in London by Nigerian and Chadian-French parents (her full name is Anaïs Oluwatoyin Estelle Marinho), released two EPs in 2019 to critical acclaim. Just before the pandemic hit, she was set to go on her first tour. Instead, she has been stuck at home, waiting out this nightmare like the rest of us. “It’s given me some time to reflect and get used to spending more time with myself,” she says. ¶ She used the year to finish her debut album, *Collapsed in Sunbeams*. It’s a lush and expansive project with a patient vulnerability at its core; Parks’ songs about love and regret flutter like memories stamped into your mind. ¶ “I wanted to delve into the past and the idea of reckoning with difficult things and celebrating the joyful things, to honor the stories that have made me who I am,” she says. “I took all of my journals that I’ve written over the years and all my folders of poems and worked from those.” JEFF IHAZA

10-SECOND BIO

HOMETOWN
London

SUN IS SHINING Parks chose her stage name — partly inspired by Frank Ocean and Earl Sweatshirt — after a day outside with friends.

The Quiet Resilience of 'Now'

Playlists are a dime a dozen, but 'Now That's What I Call Music!' compilation albums remain popular

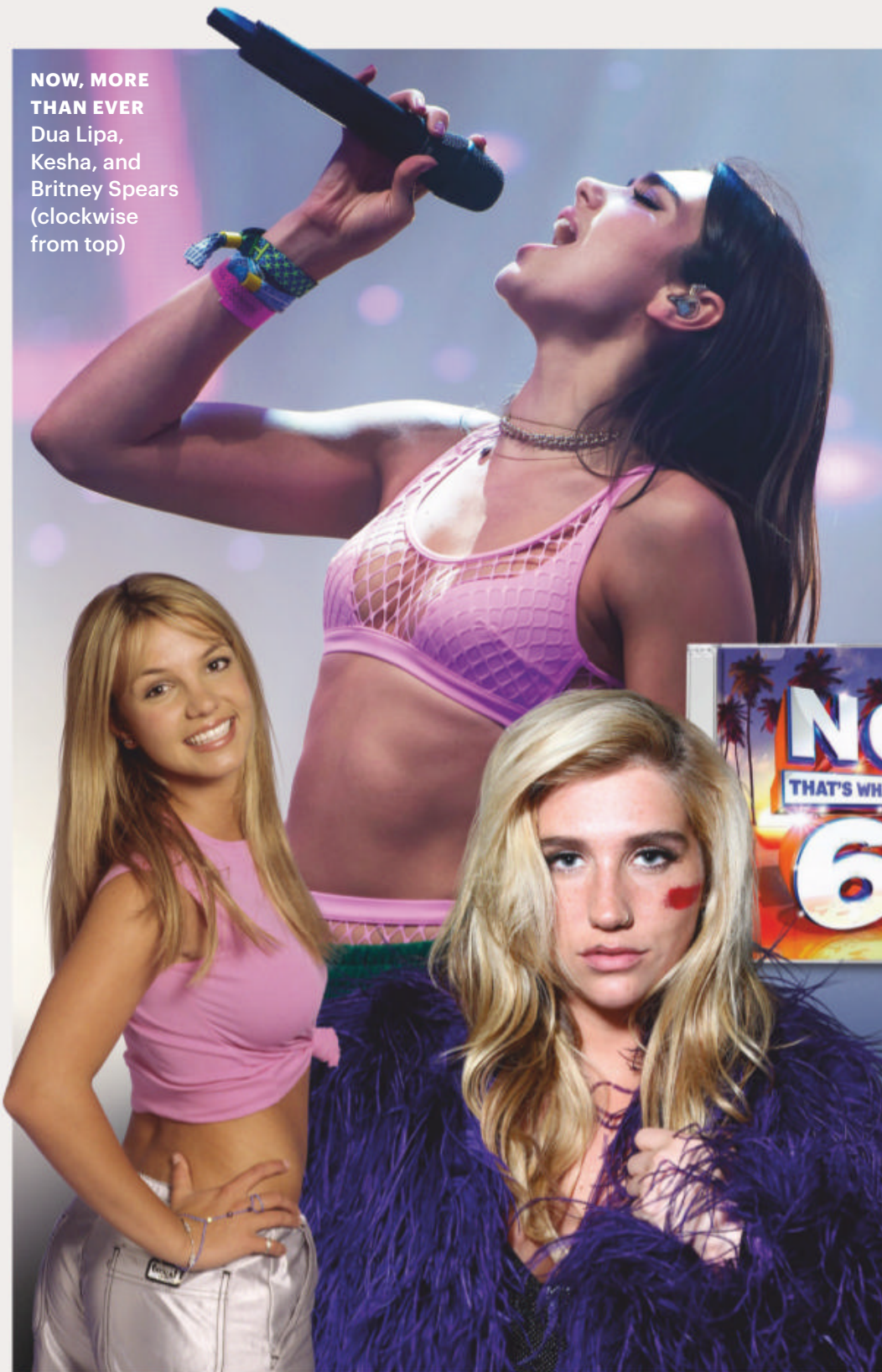
By EMILY BLAKE

IF DAMIAN GANDIA HAD TO RANK his three favorite installments of the *Now That's What I Call Music!* series, it'd go: *Now 10*, *Now 64*, *Now 57*. Probably.

With *Now 10*, it's mainly a nostalgia thing. Even though the 14-year-old from New Jersey hadn't been born when it was released in 2002, the 10th edition of the long-running pop-hits compilation – which starts with Britney Spears' "Overprotected" and ends with Nickelback's "How You Remind Me" – still brings back memories of music he heard as a kid. As for *Now 64*, which features Luis Fonsi's "Despacito" and Billie Eilish's "Ocean Eyes," Gandia credits the "top-notch" sequencing: "I don't even think there's a single problem with *Now 64*," he says.

Now That's What I Call Music! began in the U.K. in 1983; 15 years later it came to the U.S., where it regularly topped the charts. Decades after that, even as album sales have cratered, *Now* has held on to a passionate fan base. Both *Now 77*, the most recent installment, and last year's *Now 73* debuted on the Rolling Stone Top 200 Albums chart, at Numbers 159 and 104, respectively. And if the RS 200 were based purely on physical sales, *Now* albums would regularly debut

NOW, MORE THAN EVER
Dua Lipa, Kesha, and Britney Spears (clockwise from top)



near the top of the charts, moving as many as 10,000 units a week even in lean years.

Fans like Gandia, who posts his reviews of each new *Now* compilation to YouTube under the name Trevortni Desserped, provide an eager and earnest answer to the question "Who listens to *Now* in 2021?" He says that even with endless playlists available on streaming services, *Now* offers something unique. "As dumb as it sounds, it's kind of changed my life," he says. "It provided me with a different format for listening to music. It's a phenomenon that deserves to be recognized."

The smoothly sequenced track lists that Gandia admires so much are something that Jeff Moskow,

Now's head of A&R and curation, spends a lot of time laboring over. Moskow, who's been with *Now* since 2000, DJ'd at clubs when he was younger, and he tries to bring that same feeling of taking people on a musical journey to the series – which is all

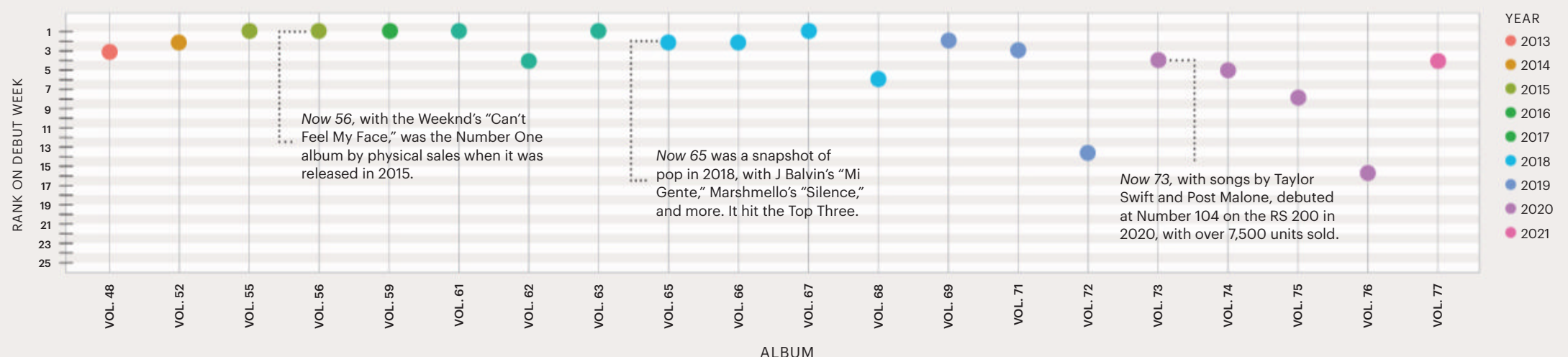
the more challenging when you're trying to blend country, hip-hop, and pop hits into one set.

In particular, he pays a lot of attention to the space between tracks. He will debate with his engineer over a mere quarter of a second, recalling one time when he was trying to create a "literally seamless blending effect from track to track."

"We went back and forth for three days," Moskow says. ®

'Now' Debut-Week Rank (2013-21)

PHYSICAL ALBUM SALES



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: IAN GAVAN/GETTY IMAGES; TONY PHOTO/GETTY IMAGES; NOW THAT'S WHAT I CALL MUSIC!; ALEXANDRA WYMAN/WIREIMAGE; L. BUSACCA/GETTY IMAGES



HIGHLIGHT

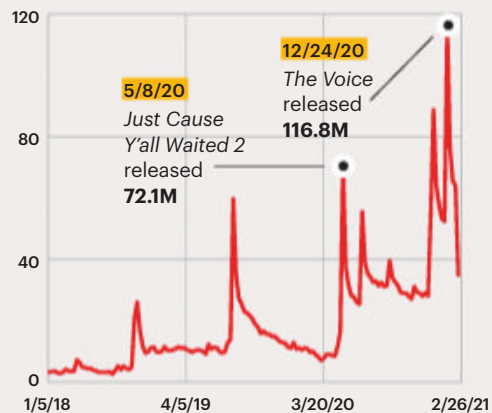
LIL DURK MAKES HIS 'VOICE' HEARD

WHILE MANY overnight sensations hit the charts thanks to TikTok trends and viral moments, Lil Durk has taken a very different path to streaming success. After beginning his career in 2011, the Chicago MC became a key part of his hometown's drill music scene, which reshaped the sound of rap music. "It was life-changing," he says. "Being part of the culture, changing the culture, changing the lingo. I'm proud to be a part of that."

Fast-forward 10 years: Durk's most recent album, *The Voice*, has drawn nearly 800 million streams, making it the second-biggest album of the year to date. *The Voice* follows another 2020 release, *Just Cause Y'all Waited 2*, which also made it to Number Two on the RS 200; Durk's other recent chart accomplishments include assisting on a pair of RS 100 hits (Pooh Shiesty's "Back in Blood" and Drake's "Laugh Now, Cry Later") and hitting Number Two on our Artists 500 chart, a new peak.

Durk has seen his share of tragedy this past year, losing his close friend and fellow artist King Von in a November shooting. Through it all, Durk's music remained strong; on the deluxe edition of *The Voice*, he mixes melodic Bone Thugs-like cadences with his drill roots. Durk sums up his recipe for all his recent success this way: "Just having fun. As long as you are yourself, it doesn't matter what you rap about." **DEWAYNE GAGE**

Lil Durk Audio Streams (In Millions)



Top Albums So Far

The biggest albums of the first two months of the year, from the Weeknd, Taylor Swift, Ariana Grande, Lil Durk, and others

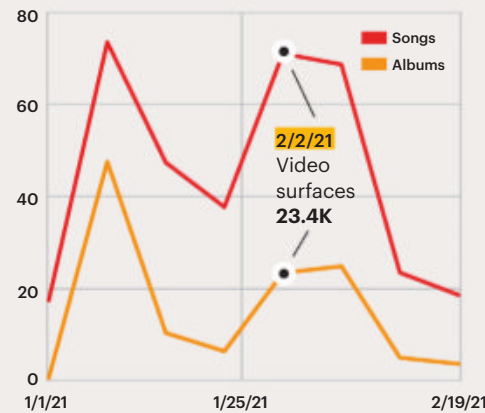
			UNITS
1		<u>Morgan Wallen</u> Dangerous: The Double Album	1.07M
2		<u>Lil Durk</u> The Voice	386K
3		<u>Pop Smoke</u> Shoot for the Stars Aim for the Moon	355K
4		<u>The Weeknd</u> After Hours	308K
5		<u>Taylor Swift</u> Evermore	290K
6		<u>Ariana Grande</u> Positions	287K
7		<u>Luke Combs</u> What You See Is What You Get	258K
8		<u>Juice Wrld</u> Legends Never Die	247K
9		<u>Taylor Swift</u> Folklore	236K
10		<u>Lil Baby</u> My Turn	226K
11		<u>The Kid Laroi</u> F*ck Love	212K
12		<u>Megan Thee Stallion</u> Good News	212K
13		<u>Post Malone</u> Hollywood's Bleeding	208K
14		<u>Harry Styles</u> Fine Line	203K
15		<u>Dua Lipa</u> Future Nostalgia	195K

This chart ranks the most popular albums in January and February 2021 by album units, a combination of album sales, song sales, and on-demand audio streams.

'Dangerous' Liaisons

Just because an artist is canceled doesn't mean people stop listening — see the case of country singer Morgan Wallen, who has been a mainstay on the charts even as the music business disowned him for a video in which he uses a racist slur. His streaming numbers stayed high after his songs were removed from playlists; his digital album sales, meanwhile, nearly quadrupled in the two weeks following the video. The upshot: Wallen's double LP, *Dangerous*, topped the RS 200 for eight straight weeks, breaking the record for most consecutive weeks at Number One.

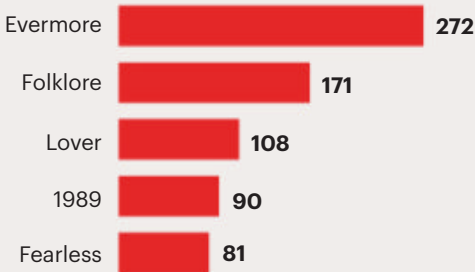
Morgan Wallen Sales in 2021 (Digital Albums and Songs)



Taylor Swift Doubles Up

After a massive 2020 that included two surprise albums, Taylor Swift kept the momentum going into 2021 with a slew of chart milestones. She topped the Artists 500 chart for a ninth time (a feat outdone only by Drake), smashed the record for most simultaneous albums on the RS 200 (with eight at once), and extended her record for most Top 10 songs on the RS 100 (15 to date). Now, Swift takes two of the Top 10 albums of 2021 so far: *Evermore* pulled in 272 million streams through February, while *Folklore* saw 171 million. We'll know soon whether her rerecording of 2008's *Fearless* nets her any new achievements.

Taylor Swift: Top Albums 2021 (Streams in Millions)



Harry Styles Gets Physical

More than a year after its release, Harry Styles' *Fine Line* is still going strong. While the album, Styles' second solo effort, isn't a streaming giant, there's one realm that it continues to dominate, week after week: physical sales. Apart from one week in December 2020, *Fine Line* has been among the Top 20 albums by that metric every single week since its debut in 2019. When you focus on vinyl sales, it's even more impressive: There have been only two weeks since its release when *Fine Line* has not been among the Top 10 albums by LP sales.

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Hip-Hop's Future-Shock Visionary

How Playboi Carti helped shape modern rap, with an assist from punk zines, Bach, and vampire iconography

By JEFF IHAZA

PLAYBOI CARTI tells me his mood of late can be described as “punk monk.” He means it sort of holistically. As if devoutly observing a religious practice, the rapper spends every single day in the studio; his current project is the deluxe version, due this spring, of his recent album *Whole Lotta Red*. Carti says he barely even sleeps, preferring the Zen of the creative process. He splits his time between living in Atlanta and flying to California to see his son, though he’s plotting a move to New York, eyeing places on the Lower East Side. “It’s a city that I can get lost in,” he says.

“Punk Monk” is also the title of one of the more memorable cuts from *Whole Lotta Red*, which topped the charts upon release in December. Carti offers devilishly candid assessments of his frustrations with the music industry, unabashedly naming names. “They tried to turn me into a white boy, but I’m not Lil Dicky,” Carti growls in his newly minted vocal register – a grizzly squawk that sounds untethered from the limitations of human vocal cords. Conceptually, the song represents a formal juxtaposition of vibes, like meditating in a mosh pit. It’s an idea central to the Carti philosophy. The 24-year-old has long professed punk-rock inspirations, but now he’s reconciling them with something that resembles inner peace. “Some people don’t know how to be alone, but I love it,” Carti explains. “‘Punk Monk’ is just an anthem of being alone in this game, and the people that you got, you can keep them right there because that’s all you need.”

Whole Lotta Red arrived just before Christmas, sounding like nothing the rapper has ever released. It caused

a rift on social media, with die-hard fans immediately embracing the project, and others recoiling at its rougher edges. The production leans on maximalist drum patterns, and Carti’s unique vocal expressionism sews right into the fabric of this new landscape. Standout track “Control” might end up being the year’s best love song, sounding more like a punk ballad than a rap track.

The arrival of *Whole Lotta Red* also marked the arrival of a new Playboi Carti, now adorned with candy-red braids and a vampire alter ego (“Vamp Anthem” goes so far as to sample Bach’s “Toccatina and Fugue in D Minor, BWV 565,” made famous, of course, by Dracula). There are other eccentricities, too. His album art is a reference to *Slash* magazine, an underground punk zine printed in Los Angeles during the Seventies.

Since the release of 2018’s *Die Lit*, Carti’s impact on the shape and tenor of modern rap music has been hard to ignore. Nowadays, everyone raps with some version of what’s been dubbed “baby voice” – the high-pitched, ad-lib-filled style that surfs on treacly, ethereal production – but Carti’s unique vocal acrobatics remain unmatched. Despite not releasing anything for years, he was able to adapt to the language of a generation online. If you type Carti’s name into YouTube, you’re greeted with dozens of pages of fan-uploaded compilations of leaks, snippets, and remixes. The most exciting way to listen to Carti, for the past several years, has been through the vantage point of his mostly young and dedicated listeners.

Now, with the unflinchingly experimental *Whole Lotta Red*, Carti hopes to lay the groundwork for the future. “That’s my job as of right now. This sound is something that’s going to be regular and relevant in the future,” he says of his new music. “That’s just

part of creating something new. If this is something that people accept right away, how different is it?” He is characteristically hush when it comes to specifics about the expanded version of *Whole Lotta Red*. “The deluxe is part two of a monster album,” he says. “What they can expect from it is some great music. That’s it.”

Born Jordan Carter, Carti grew up in South Atlanta, and as a teenager balanced basketball and an eclectic sense of creativity. He came up rapping alongside the members of Atlanta’s Awful Records collective, who exposed him to an experimental style of rap production. Carti released his first mixtape in 2017, a self-titled project that featured the viral hit “Magnolia.” The song featured an infectious hook – “In New York I milly rock/Hide it in my sock” – which would eventually get memed into oblivion, a harbinger for the ways the internet was about to morph the experience of listening to your favorite artist. A year later, *Die Lit* served as a bona fide proof of concept. Carti and the mumble-rap phenom-

enon he’s credited with giving rise to were here to stay.

In the time between *Die Lit* and *Whole Lotta Red*, Carti remained nothing short of an enigma. There was no new music despite a rapidly growing audience. Adding to the sense of intrigue was the fact that unlike most of his contemporaries, Carti basically avoids all social media. “I’ve been like this my whole life,” he says of his aversion to publicity. “When I do speak, it’s for a reason.”

Carti, though notoriously mum about his personal life, is not immune to controversy. Following the release of *Whole Lotta Red*, a firestorm emerged on social media after his ex-girlfriend, the rapper Iggy Azalea, with whom he has a child, alleged that Carti was failing his duties as a father. Carti didn’t respond to the allegations, but later posted a picture of himself with his son, Onyx, on Twitter. When we talk on the phone, he explains his reluctance to share more about his personal life with the world. “I take care of a lot of people,” he says. “I got a kid. But with the world, the only thing I want to show them is the creative process and the music. I think people want to see the normal side of Playboi Carti, but you can’t normalize me.”

The enigma surrounding Carti, he explains, isn’t intentional but more a product of how he lives life. It’s part of being a punk monk. Just before our line cuts out, I ask him about the inspiration behind his new vampire persona, and his short response could very well sum up Carti’s identity as a musician.

“Vampires live forever,” he offered nonchalantly. “Vampires is the most fashionable characters.” ®

“I think people want to see the normal side of Playboi Carti,” the Atlanta rapper says. “But you can’t normalize me.”

Rockin' Roles Will Never Die

THE MASSIVE, Oscar-winning success of *Bohemian Rhapsody* opened the floodgates to a new wave of music biopics – some of which were subsequently shut down thanks to Covid.

But most of those movies are back on track, with big stars attached. So what should we expect in the near future, and will they hit the right notes? **DAVID BROWNE AND ANDY GREENE**

	ARETHA FRANKLIN 'Respect'	ELVIS PRESLEY 'Elvis'	MADONNA Untitled	WHITNEY HOUSTON 'I Wanna Dance With Somebody'	BOB DYLAN 'Going Electric'
Cast	Jennifer Hudson ▼ as Aretha Franklin, Marc Maron as Jerry Wexler, and Mary J. Blige as Dinah Washington.	Austin Butler (<i>Once Upon a Time in...Hollywood</i>) as Elvis, Tom Hanks as Col. Tom Parker, and Yola as Sister Rosetta Tharpe.	Nothing official yet, but Florence Pugh ▼ (<i>Little Women</i>) and Julia Garner (<i>Ozark</i>) are currently top contenders.	British actress Naomi Ackie ▼ (<i>Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker</i>) will portray the late, troubled diva.	Timothée Chalamet ► as Sixties Dylan, going from folk to rock.
Can They Sing?	Oh, yeah. Anyone who has doubts, watch <i>Dreamgirls</i> .	TBD, but Butler ► sang and strummed a guitar in a 2012 episode of the sitcom <i>Are You There, Chelsea?</i>	A teenage Pugh shows range covering "Wonderwall" and "Hey Ya" in YouTube clips; Garner did amazing Britney Spears and Gwen Stefani impressions on <i>The Tonight Show</i> in 2020.	Unclear, but it won't matter: Ackie will be lip-syncing to Houston's vocals throughout the movie.	It remains to be seen, but he has sung a bit onscreen (America's "Sister Golden Hair" in 2016's <i>Miss Stevens</i> and a big-band standard in Woody Allen's <i>A Rainy Day in New York</i>).
Status	Filming is complete and a trailer is out, but the movie's been bumped to August because of the pandemic.	Filming halted in early 2020 when Hanks ▼ tested positive for Covid-19; it's currently slated for a 2022 release.	Madonna herself is directing, with Diablo Cody writing the screenplay. They claim to have 107 pages already done.	Filming has not yet begun; it's due out in 2022.	Project delayed by Covid-19.
Expected Queen-Style Live Aid Moment	Franklin's 1971 debut at the Fillmore West in San Francisco, where she won over what she called "the hippies."	Presley's career-resurrecting 1968 TV special , complete with the black leather outfit.	The 1984 Video Music Awards , where she sang "Like a Virgin" in a wedding dress and writhed on the floor. ►	Houston's stadium-rattling version of " The Star-Spangled Banner " at the 1991 Super Bowl has "cinematic climax" written all over it.	Based on the title, how could it not be the 1965 Newport Folk Festival ?
Reason to Be Optimistic	The trailer is stunning, and nobody is better suited to take on this role than Hudson , who seems to have Aretha's cocky, "Call me Miss Franklin" attitude down cold.	Director Baz Luhrmann has a natural affinity with music, as seen in <i>Moulin Rouge!</i> , the use of hip-hop in <i>The Great Gatsby</i> , and the late, lamented birth-of-rap series <i>The Get Down</i> .	Nobody knows Madonna's life like Madonna.	Same screenwriter (Anthony McCarten) as <i>Bohemian Rhapsody</i> .	Director James Mangold also made the compelling Johnny Cash biopic <i>Walk the Line</i> . Plus, Dylan is an executive producer here, and he is allowing use of his music.
Reason to Be Pessimistic	Can any vocalist, no matter how talented, live up to the legend of Aretha?	Luhrmann is supposedly taking an unconventional, nonlinear approach to Presley's story, which could be tricky.	Her previous directorial efforts, like <i>Filth and Wisdom</i> and <i>W.E.</i> , were less than encouraging.	Houston's estate is producing, which could result in downplaying her drug and personal issues.	Chalamet is the new king of winsome, but was Dylan ever so cuddly?



FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: DREAMWORKS; JACOPO RAULE/GETTY IMAGES; EVAN AGOSTINI/INVISION/AP IMAGES; SAMIR HUSSEIN/WIREIMAGE; DAVID CROTTY/PATRICK MCMULLAN/GETTY IMAGES; P. LEHMAN/BARCROFT MEDIA/GETTY IMAGES; DAVID MCGOUGH/DWI/THE LIFE PICTURE COLLECTION/GETTY IMAGES; ALEX BAILEY/TWENTIETH CENTURY STUDIOS; ANDREW BURTON/GETTY IMAGES; MARCA/UNIVERSAL IMAGES GROUP/GETTY IMAGES; REINHARD-ARCHIVE/JULSTEIN BILD/GETTY IMAGES; DAVE HOGAN/HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES; RON BULL/TORONTO STAR/GETTY IMAGES; MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

SELENA GOMEZ'S first Spanish-language EP, *Revelación*, has been a decade in the making. She first teased her fans by writing on Twitter about the idea in 2011. Life and a constantly expanding career happened, but the dream was never far from her mind. "If I'd put [this] album out back then, it wouldn't have had the same impact," she says. The biggest influence on the EP's sound is her namesake, the late icon Selena Quintanilla-Pérez; it also features production from reggaeton hitmaker Tainy and a duet with Rauw Alejandro. Since 2020's *Rare*, Gomez, 28, has linked up with Blackpink, hosted a cooking show, and launched a makeup line (Rare Beauty). Soon, she'll be appearing in her first TV role since her Disney days, starring alongside Steve Martin and Martin Short in the upcoming Hulu comedy series *Only Murders in the Building*. "I just am following where my heart leads me," she says. "I guess it'll keep going until it doesn't."

You've said that you feel like you sing better in Spanish, and you've been relearning the language. How has that been?

I was fluent until I was seven. I think what I meant is that I feel like I belong. I feel like I'm not as judged. Maybe it stems from years of people saying I'm not a real artist. Exploring this side of me has been nothing short of amazing. It really allowed me to take my voice to a different place. I just felt very confident when I would sing. I hope people hear that hard work and enjoy it.

How do you think people have perceived you as an artist — and how is that different from how you'd like to be seen?

When I was younger, it's fair to say that I had no idea what I was talking about. I was building this character, in a way, while I was singing. It's fun to do something that young kids will enjoy. That was my objective. [Later on], I didn't want that narrative anymore. . . . I know I'm not the best singer, but I do carry stories. I'm emotionally con-



Selena Gomez

The pop star on singing in Spanish, laughing with Steve Martin, and calling out Facebook for spreading lies

By BRITTANY SPANOS

nected to my music. It means just as much to me as it does for the world's best singer.

You have two seasons of your HBO Max cooking show, *Selena + Chef*, under your belt. What's the best thing you've learned from the chefs who have given you virtual cooking lessons on the show?

Patience. I get really frustrated with myself. They cut the show, of course, in a way that shows the chaotic moments. It's me being exactly what I

am, which is a little bit of a fool. But there were these silent moments in between that were really special and a little bit more intimate.

Have you made any of those recipes on your own? Yes, I have attempted. I'll be honest: They're not as good when I don't have direction, but it's so much fun. As a surprise, they gave me a little booklet, and I have all the recipes that I've tried. So it's not terrible, but it's nice to have someone guide you.

You've been filming your new Hulu show with two of the funniest people alive, Martin Short and Steve Martin. How has it been being back on a TV set?

Being back on a series feels so normal for me. I'm an executive producer, so I've been able to be a part of the process of the show. I missed being on set. Steve is such a sweetheart, and Martin is just chaos. It's a beautiful combination. I get to sit with legends and hear stories and

ask for advice. I love spending time with them.

Do you have any favorite roles of theirs?

I love Marty on *SNL*. I've seen a bajillion videos. And I love *Father of the Bride*. If I can just be a girl — like, a major girl — it's one of my favorite movies.

Lately, you've been calling out major names in tech like Mark Zuckerberg and Jack Dorsey about the spread of misinformation around Covid-19 and the Capitol riot. What made you want to publish those open letters?

I got too upset. I myself got off social media about three years ago. The way I post is through my team: I take the photo, I write the caption, I do what I have to do. But knowing what people are believing based on what they're seeing disgusts me. It's not real, and it's hurtful. I couldn't sit back and watch that happen. Maybe I would have been scared before, but there's nothing you can say to me that would hurt my feelings. I would rather stick up for millions of people.

You've accused the big sites of "cashing in from evil" when they run ads with lies about the election. What motivated you to speak that directly?

The process was difficult. I just had had enough. I was terrified to speak up before. When you're young and you're figuring out what you stand for . . . I wasn't as vocal before, which I'm upset about. But also I'm glad I didn't, because what if I didn't have the right information? Once I felt like there was just too much happening, I wasn't OK with it. People being called aliens or murderers when they've done nothing but contribute to our society . . . that does not make any sense.

Your message to Facebook's executives ended with the words "Hope to hear back from you ASAP." Have you?

Everything is politically correct, so that's all I'm going to say. I'm not going to stop. It's fine. You're still going to hear me talk about it, for a long time. ®

The Covid Queen of South Dakota

Gov. Kristi Noem's state has been ravaged by her Trumpian response to the pandemic – but that hasn't paused her national ambitions

BY STEPHEN RODRICK

AT FIRST, THE ANGEL OF DEATH skipped over South Dakota. This pleased the Snow Queen. It was Fourth of July weekend, and Gov. Kristi Noem was hosting Donald Trump for fireworks at Mount Rushmore. Covid-19 had already killed 122,000 Americans. Still, Noem cleaved closer to Trump's failed policies than any other governor. In public, she recited Trump's talking points: Covid was a Democratic plot to take over the country, masks were optional, and we're open for business. Superficially, the statements seemed less crazy when delivered in the calm voice of a rancher's daughter instead of that of an outdated tangerine con man. She even had South Dakota host a clinical trial for hydroxychloroquine, the president's preferred snake oil.

Noem made the bet that the novel coronavirus would miss her rural state, and so far she had been mostly right. As the holiday approached, South Dakota had lost only 97 people. Of course, those 97 died horrifically. Early in the crisis, ICU nurse Adam Drake monitored a Covid-positive young man at Rapid City's Monument Health Hospital. The man was intubated and allowed no visitors, per Covid protocol. He was heavily sedated and remained unresponsive until the 27-year-old Drake held up an iPad

with the man's family on the other side of a video call. Then tears ran down the man's face. He died a few days later.

But those were isolated cases; some of the early casualties were immigrant meat-plant workers and Native Americans, not Noem's base. South Dakota was doing so well that Noem was the only governor to turn down federal unemployment assistance. Meanwhile, she spent \$5 million on "South Dakota is open for adventure" travel ads that, coincidentally, starred Noem and appeared during the Republican National Convention and Tucker Carlson's show.

Noem likes to play up her ranch roots, often appearing in public clad in a trucker cap and jeans, but she wore a sleeveless red dress at Rushmore. That day, she privately presented the president with a bust of Mount Rushmore, with Trump's face added to it. He loved it. Noem and the president became so chummy that she flew to Washington, D.C., that night on Air Force One with Trump and his entourage, including Corey Lewandowski, a new friend. Rumors spread she might replace Mike Pence on the 2020 ticket. (Noem later made another trip to D.C. to smooth over things with Pence.)

Sure, she approved the call up of the National Guard on the Lakota Indian protest of Trump's visit that resulted in an ac-



CHRISTIE/ICON
SPORTSWIRE/AP IMAGES



PALE RIDER
“The media and Democrats [are] using this virus to promote fear and a political agenda,” Noem said.

tivist being charged with four felonies for writing “Land Back” on a police shield. For Noem, that was fake news. The next week, she rode maskless into an indoor Sioux Falls rodeo show on a horse, an American flag in her hand. “I choose to rely on science and data and facts,” said Noem, despite disregarding the actual science and data.

Then she pushed in all her chips. In August, she urged Americans to ride into Sturgis for the annual motorcycle rally. “We hope people come,” Noem told Fox’s Laura Ingraham. She lambasted the left’s negativity. “We’re in a good spot.” So the Harleys came and their riders drank beer and shot pool in crowded bars, totaling 366,000. They stood shoulder to shoulder as Smash Mouth’s singer screamed, “Fuck that Covid shit!”

And then the wave hit.

CASES IN SOUTH DAKOTA quadrupled in the weeks after Sturgis. (This doesn’t take into account the untold cases that the bikers spread upon returning to their home states.) Back in Rapid City, Drake, the ICU nurse, watched his hospital fill and add an ad hoc second ICU unit. “It was like nothing I’d ever seen,” says Drake. “We sat a woman up in a chair because she seemed to be doing better, but then she threw a clot and she died an hour later.”

Noem pressed on. She posted on her government Twitter account a video where she crouched in a field wearing camouflage and pointed a gun at a pheasant. She blew it out of the sky and made a joke. “I am Kristi Noem, governor of South Dakota,” she said. “This is how we do social distancing in our state. Less COVID more hunting. That’s the plan for the future.”

The actual future held a pandemic disaster. By October 5th, South Dakota’s Covid outbreak was raging and health officials labeled the state one of the most dangerous places in the U.S. That evening, a Covid-ravaged Trump was released from Walter Reed Hospital after millions of dollars in medical care. Trump saluted Marine One after it dropped him off at the White House. In Rapid City, one of Drake’s Covid patients gasped for air and watched this president on television. “I wish I could trade places with him,” said the man.

South Dakota’s death toll continued to rise. Noem stayed the course. By December 3rd, more than 1,000 South Dakotans had died due to complications from Covid, including 17 residents of the Estelline Nursing Home. Noem’s own grandmother died there on November 22nd. She tested negative.

And Noem? She was busy being Ted Cruz before Ted Cruz. The virus rav-

aged South Dakota, and Noem spent 12 days in October out of state, campaigning for Donald Trump. “It’s imperative we get President Trump back in the White House,” Noem told the *Argus Leader* in late October. In January, she campaigned in Georgia against two Democratic Senate candidates who she described in an op-ed as “communists.” Back home, South Dakota was moving up the charts. Noem’s state now ranks eighth in deaths per capita, with four times as many deaths than similarly populated but tightly compacted San Francisco. It really is quite an achievement.

South Dakota has 880,000 citizens scattered over the country’s 17th largest state, providing built-in social distancing. In theory, it should have a Covid death rate in the bottom 10, near fellow sparse states like Maine and Wyoming. Instead, there are now more

fund. If you’re OK with that, then high-tail it to South Dakota, where anecdotal evidence suggests there are political refugees arriving weekly from dreaded mask-up states like Minnesota.

The fact that Noem has emerged from a public-health disaster smelling so sweet has baffled some political observers. Actually, her moves make sense if you know that Noem is running for president. Sure, she’ll deny it, but combine the nonstop Fox appearances, the endless campaigning, and the presence of Trump whisperer Lewandowski and you have all the ingredients for a 2024 bid. (Unless Trump runs again. Then, she’d become a gender-balancing VP candidate.) Noem’s rigged-election/masks-suck/own-the-libs persona meshes perfectly with the 2021 Republican Party built on the twin pillars of Stop the Steal and “1/6 was a false-flag operation.” Noem

“It didn’t have to be this way,” says one South Dakota state senator. “Kristi Noem had a choice: Follow Trump’s way or pull us all together. She chose Trump.”

than 1,900 dead – one in 470 South Dakotans – and one in eight have tested positive for Covid, the second-highest rate in the country. Noem appeared on *Face the Nation* in February, and host Margaret Brennan asked how she could square her pro-life stance with her state having the highest Covid death rate since July. “Those are questions you should be asking every other governor in this country,” said Noem. “I’m asking you today,” said Brennan.

“It didn’t have to be this way,” says Reynold Nesiba, a Democratic South Dakota state senator. “She had a choice: Follow Trump’s way or pull us all together and make it about looking out for one another. She chose Trump.”

Noem declared victory despite the bodies strewn across her state. There she was on *Hannity* on February 25th, criticizing Biden’s Covid bill, saying, “I’ve been saying for months... that the media and Democrats were using this virus to promote fear and a political agenda.” The U.S. passed the 500,000-dead mark that week.

Today, Noem presides over a magical place, a land with maskless rodeos, water parks, and karaoke. The cost? Wallet-wise, the place isn’t that expensive; just bring some cash for steaks and a few spins of the roulette wheel. But it will bankrupt your compassion

is Trumpism with a cowgirl face. The fact that the media have hammered her for botching South Dakota’s Covid response does not matter even a little bit.

“The MAGA crowd does not give a fuck about that,” says former Republican strategist Tim Miller. “As long as Noem is making the right people angry, they’re happy, they don’t care about failures. She’s got the MAGA look.” Miller is a never-Trumper but respects the con.

“Look, she had one of the worst responses to coronavirus in the entire world,” Miller tells me. “And she’s wearing that as a positive! She’s going to troll and dunk on the wimps that cared about the fact that people were dying. MAGA World loves that.”

Noem held a fundraiser at Mar-a-Lago in March. At the end of it, a special guest emerged, in a dark suit and a too-long blue tie. It was Donald Trump.

I SPEND THREE WEEKS in South Dakota, logging 1,500 miles driving across the state. I first wanted to understand the conditions on the ground for medical professionals. So on a January day, I drive two hours from Sioux Falls to Yankton, a mill town nestled on the Nebraska border.

Dr. Michael Pietila sneaks me into his Yankton medical office through a

back entrance – not all of his medical colleagues are on board with him chatting to a reporter about the state’s Covid disaster. It turns out that Pietila went to high school with Noem near Watertown, 150 miles to the north.

“She was considered a good person from a good family,” says Pietila.

Pietila is a pulmonologist, and talks about the resistance he met when he spoke before the Yankton School Board and public and argued for a local mask protocol. But he and others persisted, and Yankton now has one of the state’s lowest Covid hospitalization rates. It hasn’t been easy.

“How would you like to be a lung specialist here?” says Pietila, who trained at the Mayo Clinic, where he studied pandemics. Pietila is loath to condemn his former classmate by name, but he does indirectly.

“We have a real problem with experts here,” says Pietila. “My preference would be that our leaders would have said, ‘We respect your personal choice, but have trust in someone you elected. I want you to wear a mask. If you can do those things, they will benefit more of us than it will harm.’” He sighs. “Instead of saying personal freedoms, choice, and liberty are more important than anything else.”

Pietila tells me about the corrosive damage Covid does to the lungs. He suggests that if more state Republicans had seen the inside of an ICU unit, they might tone down the personal-liberty talk. “I’ve never seen imaging studies of lungs look like that,” says Pietila. “Maybe a pathologist has, but I haven’t. The scarring is just unbelievable.”

Pietila knows it didn’t have to be this bad in South Dakota.

“We had advantages,” he says. “We are sparsely populated, don’t use a lot of public transportation, and don’t have that many large gatherings.” He smiles a little. “Well, until we did. But anyone who thought Covid wasn’t going to find us doesn’t know anything about a novel virus.”

A few weeks before I arrived, Noem gave an interview where she praised her own leadership and said, “I trusted the people of this great state to take personal responsibility.” This was hilarious because South Dakotans had just exercised their personal responsibility at the ballot box and approved medicinal and recreational marijuana use in a statewide referendum. Alas, legalizing weed doesn’t fit into Noem’s 2024 plans. She is fighting the people’s will for THC in court. Freedom is, apparently, just another fungible word.

I drive cross-state to Rapid City and have coffee with Dan Warnke, an ICU nurse who works with Adam Drake.



PLAGUE IN THE HEARTLAND Above: The 2020 Sturgis bike rally was a likely superspreader event. Right: The virus swept over South Dakota, despite its sparse population. Below: Native American activist Tilsen says Noem wants to shut down dissent: “She would be happy if we didn’t vote, didn’t speak.”

Warnke watched the governor’s self-congratulatory State of the State speech with dismay. He is a South Dakota native and the exact kind of person South Dakota needs to keep home if it wants to be a prosperous state. He and his wife just had a baby. He heard the governor’s words, thought of all the suffering he saw at the hospital, and was filled with something that exists between anger and despair.

“We used to be a pioneer state that helped their neighbors bring in their crops if they were sick,” Warnke tells me. We wear masks and sit at opposite ends of a long table. “We took care of one another. It wasn’t about ‘You can’t tell me what to do’ and ‘I’ll do what I want whether you get sick or not.’ I don’t know what happened.” He shakes his head. “Well, I guess our governor happened.”

IT’S LATE JANUARY IN Pierre, South Dakota’s state capital. State Sen. Nesiba keeps pushing buttons on his laptop, trying to submit a masking bill that would bring South Dakota in line with President Biden’s request for a universal masking advisory. “I’m not sure why it’s not sending,” says Nesiba, who is also an economics professor at



Augustana University in Sioux Falls. He makes a joke. “Maybe the governor has put a bug in the system.”

Nesiba wears a mask inside the maybe-150-square-foot office that houses him, Troy Heinert, and Red Dawn Foster, the only three Democrats in the state Senate. Social distancing is pretty much out of the question, but then again, Nesiba and Heinert have already had Covid. Nesiba was likely infected at a Senate budget committee hearing held last year, where most of the Republicans refused to wear masks. “I still have brain fog, but I’m getting better,” says Nesiba. (The tradition continues. He texted me from a recent winter meeting: “Four legislators are wearing masks correctly. Two have noses exposed. Nine are not wearing a mask.”)

Nesiba gives up on sending the bill – it eventually died on the Senate floor



without a vote – so I head out to the Senate gallery to watch today’s proceedings. There’s one main difference between the state’s deliberative bodies. The Senate had at least 11 members come down with Covid in 2020, so now they wear masks. The House doesn’t require masks – despite a representative dying from Covid complications in 2020. The House will have eight cases in their ranks by the end of February.

NOT THAT LONG AGO, South Dakota elected its share of Democrats, including former U.S. Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle. Like much of rural America, the state has moved away from Democratic populism to the white-grievance populism of Trump, where government officials are the modern equivalent of Reconstruction carpetbaggers. Noem’s creation myth plays into that.

Ron and Corinne Arnold raised young Kristi and her three siblings on a ranch outside Watertown. She was popular, being elected South Dakota’s Snow Queen in 1990. Being a Snow Queen “gave me my first opportunity

to sit in an interview, to speak in public,” Noem told a local paper when she entered politics. The idyllic life ended when she was in her early twenties and her father was killed in a farming accident. By then, Kristi was already married to Byron Noem. She quit college and, along with her siblings, returned home to help her mother run the family business. She tended to the ranch and raised three children over the next 15 years. She ran for a seat in South Dakota’s part-time Legislature in 2006, but made her big move in 2010, when she challenged U.S. Rep. Stephanie Herseth Sandlin, a conservative Democrat. *The Washington Post* deconstructed the contest as Sandlin’s “Mama Grizzly Bear” against the next Sarah Palin and a made-for-Fox star in the making.

Sandlin had voted against Obamacare, but Noem ran commercials tying Sandlin’s support for Nancy Pelosi as a sign of her radicalism. Sandlin suggested Noem wasn’t a serious person, and offered up Noem’s 20 speeding tickets as an adult as evidence. Noem countered that she knew suffering, and referred repeatedly to the onerous estate taxes her family had to pay off after her father’s death as an example of Washington’s wickedness. Noem won by two points.

Noem was added to the House committee dealing with estate-tax issues, and in 2015 took to the floor and spoke about how the federal government made her family’s situation ever more desperate.

“It wasn’t very long after he was killed that we got a bill in the mail from the IRS that said we owed them money because we had a tragedy happen to our family. . . . I chose to take out a loan, but it took us 10 years to pay off that loan to pay the federal government those death taxes. It is one of the main reasons I got involved in government and politics, because I didn’t understand how bureaucrats and politicians in Washington, D.C., could make a law that says when a tragedy hits a family, they somehow are owed something from that family business.”

The only problem was that her story is, charitably, a tall tale. The IRS doesn’t send a tax bill after a death; it waits for you to file a tax return first. Both *USA Today* and *Huffington Post* pointed out that while Noem’s family did pay roughly \$169,000 in estate taxes over a decade, it was at the hardly onerous rate of four percent interest. In addition, the entire tax could have

been avoided if Arnold had simply updated his will, something he hadn't done for more than a decade. That small act would have allowed for a tax-free transfer. The media also noted that during the time Noem's family was paying off their low-interest debt, they received \$3.7 million in farm subsidies. Arnold also had left his wife a \$1 million insurance policy that easily could have paid off the tax, but a smart accountant probably figured carrying a loan at four percent was a good deal.

Noem alternated between saying the law was still a bad law and keeping her mouth closed when confronted by Capitol Hill reporters. Mostly she just kept walking. Remarkably, Noem has stuck to her story. Her 2018 gubernatorial campaign website still reads:

"While Kristi was taking college classes, her father was killed in a farming accident. . . . As the family was still suffering from their loss, they were hit with the death tax, which impacted almost every decision they made for a decade. It also became one of her motivations to get involved in politics."

Noem's estate-tax fib is symbolic of her phony less-government-more-freedom talking points. She rarely mentions the \$1.25 billion in CARES Act money South Dakota received when bragging about her state's Covid economy. This was particularly ironic since the Associated Press reported that businesses connected to her family members received \$600,000 in federal relief money. (Noem's aides stressed the governor had no personal stake in the ventures.) It reminds me of something Nesiba said back in Pierre.

"One of the things about South Dakota is it's easy to be a rugged individualist when you get more money from the federal government than you give to the federal government."

AS PER USUAL with any outlet that isn't spelled F-O-X, I couldn't get anyone from Noem's press office on the phone, so I dropped in on one of the weekly news conferences she holds in Pierre when the Legislature is in the session. It lasts only 22 minutes, but it gives a pretty good sense of the game she is playing. About a half-dozen masked reporters wait in the governor's big conference room. Noem enters with some aides, and it is quickly apparent this is the least-favorite part of her day. She forces a smile of a hello, but speaks in clipped sentences like a long-suffering high school teacher humoring docile students. It is a few days after Dr. Deborah Birx had said in an interview that Noem's sanctioned Sturgis rally was "a mistake." I ask her about it. She begins with her regular

line that "We have followed the science of the virus and what we know about it, the data, and the facts on the ground." After that non-answer, she can't resist getting in a shot. "I know Dr. Birx has expressed a lot of opinions," says Noem, with a wry look. It is classic Noem, casting Birx as mealy-mouthed rather than a scientist adjusting her analysis as facts changed in a fast-moving pandemic.

"I didn't necessarily want people shamed if they chose not to, but left that up to individuals to decide," says Noem about mask-wearing. Per usual, Noem doesn't address whether part of her job as the state's chief executive is to nudge her citizens into doing the

election. Someone then asks Noem why she won't release how much it costs taxpayers for South Dakota state troopers to provide protection on her multiple campaign trips.

"I don't talk about security," says Noem, who has had a \$400,000 fence built around the governor's mansion.

A minute later she is gone.

NOEM WAS ELECTED the governor of South Dakota in 2018 with just 51 percent, a low vote total for a Republican in red South Dakota. Some of it was the strength of her Democratic opponent, Billie Sutton, the scion of a famous South Dakota rodeo family. But it was also skepti-



THE MAGA GOVERNOR Noem was rumored to be a possible replacement for Mike Pence. At CPAC, she defended Trump and attacked science, saying, "Dr. Fauci is wrong a lot."

right thing and protecting one another.

I follow up and ask Noem if she regrets not centering her Covid response more around the South Dakota tradition of taking care of their neighbors and less around the nebulous concept of freedom. She pauses for a second, looks at me directly with a steely glance, and her eyes say, "I'm not going to walk into that trap." She repeats her science-and-data line before offering some red meat to the base. "I think there's a breaking of our republic when leaders overstep the authority that they have, infringing on personal rights and responsibilities."

Another reporter asks if, in the wake of the January 6th riots, she regrets calling the election "rigged." Instead she offers contradictory non-answers. "I think that we deserve fair and transparent elections . . . there's a lot of people who have doubts about that." Later she adds, "We had an election, we had a result, President Biden is the president."

It is a cynical if effective play. No good has come to Republicans who have admitted Trump actually lost the

cism that Noem actually wanted to do the job and wasn't just using the office as a stage for Republican culture wars. (She didn't soothe any minds when on her first full day in office she held a prayer service that included a minister who called for all the demons in Pierre to be vanquished.)

Still, she won, and it wasn't merely because of the R before her name. "She has a specific South Dakota charm that fits into how we romantically see our state," a longtime Democratic figure told me. "She's a true rancher and farmer. She hunts and rides a horse well, and has that smile. That is no small thing."

Noem immediately went to work establishing her hard-right bona fides on both the spiritual and logistical front. She pushed for a state law requiring that all South Dakota schools have the words "In God We Trust" prominently displayed, winning praise from the religious right. (This year, she signed legislation preventing transgender girls from participating in women's high school sports.) In order to better

broadcast her message from isolated Pierre, Noem built herself a \$130,000 studio in the basement of the Capitol.

That first year in office was marked by one comic catastrophe and an important connection. Noem's administration contracted a Minnesota ad firm to come up with a new state anti-drug campaign, and they settled on South Dakotans repeating the slogan "Meth, we're on it." The television spots cut from ranchers to football players all saying "Meth, we're on it." The whole country laughed, but the Noem administration refused to pull the ads.

Her Trumpian concede-nothing approach to governing has become her hallmark, and South Dakota political observers trace its roots to a Canadian meeting. Longtime conservative activist-billionaire Foster Friess hosts an annual fishing trip off of British Columbia that brings together conservative leaders for a working vacation. In the summer of 2019, Noem attended, along with ex-Trump campaign manager Corey Lewandowski. They apparently became fast friends. Over the next year, Lewandowski and Noem were spotted conferring at inexplicably diverse places, including a Louisiana fundraiser and a vizsla-breeding business in Roscoe, South Dakota. According to the Associated Press, Lewandowski spoke at one of Noem's monthly Cabinet lunches and urged department heads in the 46th most-populous state to make their own national television appearances for Noem. (Noem officials say Lewandowski has no formal role with the governor.)

The 47-year-old Lewandowski is an odd duck even in Trump World. He was fired as 2016 campaign manager, but not before he was accused of manhandling a reporter. (Lewandowski did not respond to requests for comment.) He still stayed in the president's orbit and became best known for a contentious appearance before a congressional committee investigating Trump and Russia, where he said he had no obligation to tell the media the truth, and for making an incoherent Fox News appearance, where the host eventually urged him to drink some coffee.

The Lewandowski link provides the connective tissue that fuses Noem's and Trump's mask policies. Something often misunderstood about masking in South Dakota – and perhaps a reason for the initially low infection rate – is that many of South Dakota's towns and cities invoked their own policies during the outbreak's early days. But when the plague didn't come immediately, South Dakotans rebelled against their more conscientious political leaders. Noem offered no support, and a

masking mandate crumbled in Sioux Falls when the Republican mayor voted against it. Across the state, in Rapid City, Common City Council President Laura Armstrong created a Facebook page promoting local businesses complying with CDC guidelines as well as mask-required businesses for those worried about contracting the virus. Conservative activists likened her to a Nazi and brought pictures of yellow Stars of David to council meetings. They threatened her on social media and trespassed on her isolated property (multiple times), and a colleague of hers had the lug nuts loosened on a family car. Noem said nothing.

Beyond Covid, Lewandowski's influence can be seen in the adversarial relationship Noem has created with the South Dakota media. She has refused to do an interview with Angela Kennecke, the state's most prominent newscaster, citing her bias. She also hired Ian Fury as her press secretary. The twentysomething Fury had no South Dakota experience, but he was a graduate of Hillsdale College, a former aide to Kansas Gov. Sam Brownback, worked for the Koch brothers-backed organization Americans for Prosperity, and served as communication director for Congressman Jim Jordan. With the Noem job, Fury may be the youngest GOP apparatchik to black out his hard-right bingo card. Both Fury and policy director Maggie Seidel have taken a combative approach to media relations. Seidel has circulated to groups of reporters emails ripping another reporter's work, and Fury often takes to Twitter to eviscerate stories that do not cast a halo around his employer. "They get you both ways," a reporter told me. "They give you no access and won't answer your questions when you're reporting, and then rip you afterward."

Noem's administration has also turned her Trumpian fire hose at both competitors and randos. Eyebrows arched when Noem hired former Trump mouthpiece Daniel Bucheli as communications director for the South Dakota Department of Health. His communications skills were on display when a Washington state resident tweeted that his mom in South Dakota wasn't getting a vaccine shot because of racism. Bucheli's Health Department tweeted back, "What evidence do you have of the above? Your racist and partisan hack accusation has ZERO evidence b/c it's simply not true." No one could figure out what the point was.

Recently, Noem's account needled neighboring Minnesota for having to raise taxes after the Covid lockdown: "@GovTimWalz shut down Minnesota's economy. Now he's facing \$1.3 BIL-

LION in budget shortfalls and is recommending huge tax increase to make ends meet. REMINDER TO MINNESOTANS: South Dakota Means Business."

There was no mention that Minnesota has a death-per-capita rate half of South Dakota's. In January, fellow 2024 GOP hopeful Nikki Haley tweeted about a Texas school that allowed poor students to buy essential items without cash. Noem replied in a tweet, "There is no such thing as a free lunch."

"All of this stuff is straight out of the Lewandowski-Trump playbook," a longtime South Dakota politico tells me, lamenting the loss of Great Plains civility. "We haven't seen anything like that here before."

The MAGA posturing could work to Noem's advantage. "I would never put Corey in charge of complex strategy," says Miller, who was hip-checked by Lewandowski at a 2016 presidential

profit. "We're one of the poorest counties in the country and a hundred miles from a major hospital. We're trying to protect them." He pours himself a cup of coffee. "You know who was against that? Governor Kristi Noem."

Tilsen has found himself awash in Noem angst since she took office in 2019. In the last week of the 2019 legislative session, and without hearings, Noem introduced an anti-"riot boosting" law that would make it a felony to have aided or abetted a protester in any way. The bill was clearly targeted at Native Americans and others protesting the Keystone pipeline that was being revived under Trump. Noem was hoping to avoid the headlines that lit up the nation in 2016 with the pipeline protests up north on the Standing Rock reservation. "Her whole thing is about shutting us down," says Tilsen. "She'd be happy if we didn't

"We're the poorest county in the country, and we're trying to protect our elders," says a Native American leader. "You know who was against that? Governor Kristi Noem."

debate. "But he has his finger on the pulse of the Trump superfan. And that helps Noem."

Noem and Lewandowski headlined their own event on October 9th, 2020. Trump was still in quarantine after his Covid sickness, but that didn't stop a maskless Noem and Lewandowski from speaking to 250 people in a Naples, Florida, VFW Hall.

"At some point we have to let Americans live," shouted Lewandowski. Noem added, "If someone is concerned about these events they can stay home."

I'M STILL HALF ASLEEP on a deserted state road, so I might not have noticed I was entering the Pine Ridge Reservation if an old woman with a clipboard didn't wave down my car. She asks me my name, writes it down, and I am on my way in about a minute.

Almost immediately I start seeing signs at the end of driveways reading "Do not visit... elders quarantining." Just outside of Wounded Knee, I drive down a twisting dirt road filled with rambunctious dogs and arrive at Nick Tilsen's place. I ask him about the signs. "We're losing elders at an alarming rate, people who speak Lakota fluently," says Tilsen, the CEO of NDN Collective, a Native American-run non-

profit. "You know who was against that? Governor Kristi Noem." Tilsen and other tribes joined forces with the ACLU and challenged Noem's law. It was quickly struck down in federal court as unconstitutional, with the judge deriding it as so broad "that Martin Luther King would have been arrested for writing 'Letter From Birmingham Jail.'" The whole exercise cost the South Dakota taxpayers about \$150,000 in court fees. (A less draconian version of the bill was passed in 2020.)

After the pandemic began, many South Dakota reservations started putting up roadblocks and checkpoints to keep visitors away from their vulnerable population. Noem initially threatened to call in the National Guard to end the checkpoints, but backed off after someone told her that the tribes had autonomy to do what they wanted to keep their people safe. "I thought for a while she was going to send her police and we were going to meet them with our police," says Tilsen. He lives less than 10 minutes from Wounded Knee, a community that first saw American troops massacre 150 American Indians in 1890, and then, in 1973, laid siege to the town for 71 days in a standoff about indigenous rights.

Noem's hands-off approach to Covid was seen as a death sentence by Native Americans who lived in small, densely

populated houses and are a helicopter ride away from a ventilator. So, the tribes began taking care of their own. "If you test positive in South Dakota, they just give you a call and don't contact anyone else," a contact tracer tells me on the Standing Rock reservation. "We couldn't live with that. Someone tests positive, we call everyone the patient has come into contact with."

It's not the only way the state and the tribes have operated differently. Back in Pierre, state Sen. Heinert tells me that when he tested positive, his tribe, the Rosebud Sioux, brought meals to his home to help him ride out his 14 days of quarantine. He points over at Nesiba, his colleague. "They don't do anything like that for South Dakotans." Indeed, one January night I tagged along as a Native American support group delivered meals to Covid sufferers living off-reservation in Rapid City. The group prides itself on there not being one Native American Covid-related fatality in the city.

Heinert gives some credit to the Indian Health Services for providing reservations with tests and equipment. "We lived through smallpox, so we take the pandemic seriously," he says. Heinert snorts when I ask him about Noem's masks-optional and "We're open for business" approach.

"To me, it's a lack of empathy," says Heinert. "If you're governor you have to have empathy for others. She doesn't have it."

Back on the Pine Ridge Reservation, Tilsen says the disrespect never ends. Noem skipped the annual State of the Tribes address, the indigenous community's version of the State of the State. The pressing event? A maskless tour of a Sioux Falls factory. "I don't know another governor who has missed one," says Tilsen, who lives on reservation where unemployment hovers around 70 percent. "It's just a slap in the face, especially during a pandemic."

There is some good news. Tilsen has previously played a significant part in helping with a \$60 million housing development a few miles up the road that will partially alleviate the reservation's horrific lack of modern housing. Still, most of his current efforts are directed toward staying out of jail. It goes back to Trump and Noem. When the governor announced that Trump would be coming to South Dakota's Black Hills and Mount Rushmore for the Fourth of July, Tilsen moved into action. "It's right after George Floyd. We're watching protests and statues coming down," says Tilsen. "And we're in the midst of a pandemic, where indigenous black and brown people are dying in disproportionate levels." He [Cont. on 78]

He's Hollywood royalty and now a movie star in his own right – but he made sure to take a long, hard road to success

By Jamil Smith

Photographs by Dario Calmese

John David Washington Does the Right Thing



LIKE ONE of those bullets in *Tenet*, John David Washington is traveling backward through time. Standing on the 50-yard line of his old high school football field in Van Nuys, California, where he hasn't set foot in 18 years, he starts replaying the game-day ritual. Washington's alma mater, Campbell Hall, an Episcopal day school in Studio City, didn't have its own field, so the team would bus over here to Birmingham High for battle. "So we get off there, come to that light, turn left," he says, pointing beyond the southeast corner of the stadium to the intersection of Balboa and Victory boulevards. "That's when the butterflies and the jitters started, because here we are."

He points to where the band would stand, where the cheerleaders would do their thing, and then to the wooden bleachers, third row from the bottom. There, right in the middle, sat his parents, Pauletta and Denzel Washington, every week. They were die-hards, though his mom hated seeing him get hit. After games, over her home cooking, Dad would sit J.D. down for a little coaching, dishing out praise – and a few notes. "He would love when I was free out there and not thinking about stuff," Washington says. "He would say stuff like, 'Trust your block. You might have hesitated here or there. You see the hole, you go. Don't hesitate.'"

He takes a deep inhale. "This is crazy being on this field right now, man," he says. I can tell he's smiling beneath his black KN95 mask. "I mean, this field represents freedom to me. I've bled on this very field. I've worked out a lot of issues through this field."

How many issues could a handsome, athletic scion of Hollywood royalty have to work out? He was a black kid growing up in America, for starters. But beyond that, maybe it's not so easy to be the son of one of the world's greatest actors, whose films your friends can all quote by heart.

Maybe it's even harder if you sense deep inside that you're an artist too, but you're afraid you won't come close to reaching the bar that guy set. Maybe it would make you angry if everyone assumed the world was yours for the taking, that you'd never have to earn anything. Maybe that would prompt you to take a detour away from the arts and into sports – first as a running back at Division II Morehouse College, then to the lower echelons of the NFL – where every yard you scrapped for was yours.

Washington, 36, tried all that, and for a while, it worked. But after a torn Achilles tendon laid him up, he realized football had served its purpose – the family business was calling, and it was time to pick up the phone. In 2015, he eased into acting with the role of mercurial wide receiver Ricky Jerret on *Ballers*, HBO's brash football dramedy starring the Rock. Within three years, he was co-starring in Spike Lee's *BlacKkKlansman*, based on the true story of a black cop infiltrating the Ku Klux Klan in the Seventies. From there, it was a quick hop to Christopher Nolan's sci-fi spy behemoth *Tenet*, followed by this year's *Malcolm & Marie*, a combustible relationship drama that sees Washington bring the full force of his charisma to bear in an all-night fight with his girlfriend, played by Zendaya. And when we





speak in February, he's filming a David O. Russell movie with a murderers' row of actors including Robert De Niro, Chris Rock, Margot Robbie, and Christian Bale, among others. In just a few short years, in other words, John David Washington has become a bona fide movie star. As for those issues? That part is a little more complicated.

"I don't even know if [people] see me as John David yet," he says later, tiptoeing into a question about how he handles celebrity. "I'm still 'Denzel's son.' I'm always his son. So it's like, the day that they start seeing just me is the day that I can maybe better answer that question about celebrity. 'Cause I'm still not out of his shadow."

GROWING UP IN Toluca Lake and then Beverly Hills, the oldest of the four Washington children (sister Katia is a producer who worked on *Malcolm & Marie*, Olivia is an actor, and her twin brother, Malcolm, is a filmmaker), John David showed an early passion for the arts. He was a movie obsessive who, Katia says, could recite the entirety of his father's Civil War drama *Glory* by the time he was 10 years old. He drew and painted as a kid and all through high school, finding it a calming counterbalance to the more physical outlet of sports. (He was also a prankster who put his early acting instincts to work by imitating his father's voice and scolding his siblings from another room in the house.) But as his talents on the field developed – in step with his father's fame rocketing into the stratosphere – he leaned harder into football.

"Acting, I knew I always wanted to do," Washington recalls as we stroll slowly from end zone to end zone. His easygoing manner belies the intensity of what comes next. "But I literally wanted to get some aggression out. The growing pains of being a teenager, the stuff I've experienced, being the son of someone. I could get that out here. I wanted to be productive with my anger. And I could use it as part of something positive."

Because the Campbell Hall program was in its infancy, with a team of only 28 kids, Washington played on both sides of the ball, making tackles as a strong safety and racking up thousands of yards as a running back. With each passing year the team got better and drew bigger, starrier crowds. "We were like the Mighty Ducks," he says. The Olsen twins were in the stands; NFL legend Jim Brown watched John David run for his longest touchdown, a 75-yarder in his final game. Not that Washington really cared about that stuff. "The football is pure," as he puts it. "The truth is on the field. The story is what happens on the field."

Washington emerged as a leader on the team, someone who wanted the ball with the game on the line. ("This is where things were about to happen," he says as we cross the 40-yard line. "This is where they can turn to me, and I can

turn it up.") His name started appearing in the paper. His confidence grew with his success – though, ever the dutiful son and big brother, it was also tied up with his family's approval. His parents instilled a work ethic in their kids, a fierce devotion to preparation. These were things he could showcase on the field. Football was a way for him to do right by all of them, but to do it his way, to have something that was his own.

"I just remember how good it felt, how proud I would make my parents, my family, after the games," he says. "Even in losses, I was balling, and we would talk for hours about the game, analyzing, break every single thing down. And knowing they were right there... I'd get out from a hit or something, and I'd glance sometimes and see them, and just... it feels good. It feels like your work is rewarded when you make people that care about you feel proud."

Proud might be an understatement. The whole family attended games: Malcolm was a ball boy, Pauletta was the family videographer for a while. Katia says they have a running gag about John David dominating anything he puts his mind to. "Watching him excel is something I'm used to, because he's just annoyingly great at things," she says. "We joke about it, but he's great at things because he tries, he pushes himself, he doesn't settle."

He's been known to hold the rest of the family to those exacting standards. Katia says that when they'd play basketball together as kids, "he would push my buttons, get in my face." He took no pity on her just because she was his little sister. The point wasn't to bully her, it was to make her better. "Nobody would believe me now, because he's the sweetest person on Earth, but at the time I thought he was trying to end me on the court," she says with a laugh. "There were real tears. I'd run away down the street. [Then he'd be] like, 'But your jump shot was nice, wasn't it? See?'"

When it came time for college, Washington had offers from a few schools but chose the historically black Morehouse in Atlanta, because he wanted to get out of Dodge. Two thousand miles away from L.A., he thought he could keep shaking off that cloak of privilege everyone else kept draping over him. (Even now, he makes his home far from Hollywood, in Brooklyn.) "I wanted out," he says. "I wanted to be in my culture, to be with my people, because I felt like I had more to prove. I [wanted to] show my community that I can play ball against those Southern dudes, I can play with the best." His mom grew up in North Carolina, so he had cousins in the area who'd come to games and surprise him afterward with Bojangles chicken. Once again, John David put their joy and their pride in his hands. "It was like family reunions," he says. "I'd

put a little pressure on myself, like, I have to ball to keep this family connection going. The better I play, the more connected we can all be."

He dug deeper, ran harder. As he set individual-game and career records at the school, he began to believe the NFL might actually be within his grasp. At the same time, the injuries piled up. Broken clavicle. Torn meniscus. Concussions. He risked his body week after week to show people his heart.

"When I was playing, I was eyes closed, balls to the wall, man," Washington says. "I did not care about injury. I welcomed the injuries, because I felt like if I could play through it, I'm proving more to people – to myself – that this isn't a handout, this is for real. I'm not doing this because it's recreational. I was doing it like my life depended

on it." Later, he'll describe how breaking a rib made him feel like he was doing something right: "They didn't break my rib because I'm Denzel's son, they broke my rib because I'm balling on them, and I'm doing great."

In 2006, after watching the draft for an entire weekend – his dad parked in front of the TV, obsessively analyzing the picks in each round ("My pops shoulda been working for ESPN, man"), his mom baking "about five cakes" to cook away her nerves – the Washington family learned that the then-St. Louis Rams wanted to sign John David as an undrafted free agent. They all "went berserk." Though he never made the 53-man roster, he stayed on the practice squad for two seasons, grinding it out every day. That was followed by four seasons in the UFL. That is, until the final injury: the torn Achilles tendon that ended his playing days at 28.

BACK IN THE Hollywood that John David Washington had been studiously avoiding, casting director Sheila Jaffe was going through her own kind of pain. She had been searching for an entire year to find the right person to play an egotistical yet likable wide receiver for the HBO drama that would come to be called *Ballers*. She'd auditioned somewhere around a thousand people, actors and former NFL players alike. No one fit. But she heard that, yes, "Denzel's son" had played a little ball. She placed a call.

Which is how it came to be that Washington hobbled into his first audition on crutches, with lots of real-life experience, a little trepidation, and no formal training as an actor. He'd told no one about the opportunity but his mom, whom he calls "the most consistent person in my life."

John David speaks with reverence about Pauletta – her experiences growing up in the segregated South, her perspective on the world, and especially her talents as a performer. She's a pianist and a singer, a Juilliard alum who's done

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Broadway, television, and film. He recalls seeing her in a one-woman show when he was a boy and being captivated in the same way he was when he watched his dad on the big screen: “I saw this person I saw every day at home turn into this other person. It was almost like she wasn’t even a person – she was this radiant energy that blasted through my spirit. It gave me a feeling I’ve been holding onto my whole life.”

What better person to become his new coach. As John David prepared to step into Ricky Jerret’s cleats, Pauletta ran lines with him. They rehearsed scenes. She drove him to the audition. And Jaffe found her man.

“I hadn’t been in Los Angeles in so long,” he says. “And I stayed around for the healing process. So I was seeing [my mom] more, and we just bonded over this rebirth of her son, coming into what I really wanted to do. Maybe she knew that already, but she was there for the birth of this person you see now.”

As *Ballers* took off, Washington was still angsty about the family name, adamant that no one assume he was coasting. For a while, he refused to do press for the show. The scars of his playing days were fresh in more ways than one: Despite his relentless effort and sacrifice, he’d never been able to convince all of the skeptics, even when he made it to the league. He still gets animated talking about it today. “I literally had situations where [people] think I don’t need my scholarship because I’m Denzel’s son,” he says. “Well, I feel like I earned the scholarship. I worked hard, I broke my ribs, I got concussions. I worked for that contract, even though I sat on the bench.

“I don’t operate like that anymore,” he continues, not entirely convincingly, “and some of them have a point – maybe you’re right! But at the time? I’m not going to be denied. I deserve it just like the next person, because I’m working my ass off for it. Just because I’m related to him doesn’t mean that I’m less deserving of something, especially when I’m putting in the work.” Even friends, Washington says, would sometimes casually suggest, “You don’t have to worry about anything,” or, “You’re going to be taken care of,” as if his whole life was predestined, would be handed to him stress-free.

If that’s how some people perceived him in his playing days, how would they feel when he stepped into his parents’ realm? “Honestly, the pressure, that’s what dictated a lot of my behavior,” he says. “This level of greatness [my parents have] as artists, both of them. So I gotta be in line. I gotta be in pocket.”

He handled it the only way he knows how: putting in the work. On breaks from shooting *Ballers* in Miami, he’d fly up to New York to train with acting coaches such as Rochelle Oliver. When I ask him why he’d bother taking classes

when he was getting on-the-job training, he digs in: “I’m thinking long term. I want to be the best that I can be. What did I do in football? I worked on my game – strength coach, conditioning, drilling day in, day out. I need to know how to research the character. I have great instincts, but I need to marry that with an analytical approach, to throw out what I don’t need and keep what’s useful.”

Soon enough the press came to him. And then, after a couple of years and a couple of movies (*Love Beats Rhymes*, *Monsters and Men*), another very important call. Spike Lee had cast Washington in what was actually his first role: At six years old, he was one of the schoolchildren who stands up to shout, “I am Malcolm X!” at the end of the film that would earn his dad a third Oscar nomination. Lee always knew that wouldn’t be John David’s last time on film. Now, more than 20 years later, he was offering him a starring role in *BlackKkKlansman*.

“It was this circle route,” the director says, tossing off a football analogy. “I always [thought] that, sooner or later, he would come back to his love, besides sports. And that is film. But I have to tell you, because I know how hard it’s been for my son Jackson being the only son of Spike Lee, if you want to be an actor, and your father is Denzel Washington? That shit ain’t easy.”

That said, Lee felt he’d already seen all he needed to see to know he had the chops. “John David Washington did not ‘audition’ for *BlackKkKlansman*,” he reminds me. “All he had to do was say yes or no, and luckily he said yes. I had complete confidence that he could do what needed to be done to make the role successful and the film. I was not hesitant about it. I trust my instincts, and I was right.”

The role of Ron Stallworth, a real-life Colorado Springs cop who worked with his white colleagues to penetrate the ranks of the KKK, earned Washington Screen Actors Guild and Golden Globe nominations for best actor – and the attention of Christopher Nolan. In their first meeting while he was casting *Tenet*, Nolan says the actor “felt like a rocket on a launchpad.” He was full of energy and ambition, Nolan says, as well as the physicality balanced with deep empathy that Nolan knew the lead role, Protagonist, would require. And if Washington still had any doubts about his abilities, Nolan was happy to erase them, constantly telling him to trust his instincts during filming: “It was a long shoot, and he was in every single scene, and had enormous pressures in terms of what he had to deliver. It was just wonderful to see him discovering all the things he could do.” Despite the pandemic spoiling its domestic theatrical release, the movie has grossed more than \$360 million internationally – success that Nolan attributes directly to Wash-

ington’s appeal. “John David did an incredible job of carrying the movie,” he says, “because it rests very firmly on his shoulders and his charisma as a leading man.”

Washington gives the credit for much of his success to those two directors, who “really showed me time after time that I belong.” But his sister Katia has noticed a deeper driving force as his career has evolved: “The ability to say what he wanted is something that he’s definitely grown into, in a way that I’m super impressed by. To say, ‘I want to go after this dream of being an actor, and I want to do it my way, and I want to do the roles that make me feel fulfilled.’ And [to] stretch himself, and try things. That’s not easy. It’s been really inspiring.”

The biggest stretch, in some ways, has been the smallest movie. *Malcolm & Marie* is an intimate, black-and-white film written and shot during the pandemic on a shoestring budget, with no cast except its two stars. The story pits Washington’s Malcolm, a rising filmmaker struggling to find his voice in Hollywood, against Zendaya’s Marie, the girlfriend who helps propel him to a professional breakthrough, in a one-night exhibition of emotional violence. Malcolm rails about movie critics and the frustrations of being black in show business. He cuts Marie down when she accuses him of stealing her life story for his film. He storms off outside in the dark to vent his anger physically yet silently – kicking the grass, jousting an invisible sword, and swinging a bat that isn’t there. He crouches by her in the bathtub, tearfully professing his love. *Tenet* may have had Washington jumping from moving cars and scaling buildings, but this is by far his most dynamic role. And for once, it seems, he let some of that intense preparation and perfectionism fall away.

“I really had to get away from my process,” he says. “I had to let Malcolm in. I had to release myself of all of the actory questions, the who, what, when, why... I had to underprepare. When I stopped thinking about what I was researching, that’s when the guy came to me. It’s so weird. I just thought about my personal life, that’s when the truth started coming out.

“I’m being vague because I have to,” he continues, “but there’s a certain energy that I wanted to capture, an opportunity to carry the spirits of artists, and not just black artists, feeling like they’re in a box. This idea of identity, which I’m still trying to dispel, that can be very frustrating. Just me being related to who I am.” He brings it back to the Birmingham High turf: “This independence, why we’re standing on this field. This field represented a lot of moments that Malcolm was ranting [about].”

Katia saw the change in her brother on set: “Watching him act, it was so amazing up close, because of the openness and freedom that the role called for. Seeing it grow and build on itself as we were shooting was incredible. It was watching him be free, and be open, and be an artist. That was new.”

“I’m not going to be denied. I deserve it just like the next person. I’m working my ass off for it.”



Washington is the only person writer-director Sam Levinson had in mind for the role, and the actor says Levinson gave him so much room to interpret Malcolm that, for the first time, he felt that the character was entirely his. That feeling, in turn, may have gotten him one step closer to his ultimate goal with the work: forging an unbreakable bond with the audience. “Selfishly, I pursue the feeling that I had when I watched my dad in *Glory*, when I watch Robert De Niro,” he says. “That I can make somebody feel hope, joy, pain, connect with the character as if they know them.”

“Maybe they do know a piece of them,” he says, musing on that mysterious alchemy that takes place between actor and character. Just as football allowed him to reveal parts of himself he couldn’t express with words, so too does acting. “If they see something they connect with, they’re seeing pieces of me that I’m discovering when I’m doing the thing. They don’t know that they’re seeing pieces of me, but we’re connected in that way. . . . I hope that somebody can come up to me someday and say, ‘I saw a piece of you in me that was so real, so true, that has never left.’”

THERE IS ONE area where Washington’s growing confidence fades somewhat, at least on film. “Kissing scenes, huge challenges for me,” he says later, as we sit outside at the Marmalade Cafe in Sherman Oaks. Even with the likes of Zendaya? “Love scenes? I hate them. I hate ’em, I hate ’em, I hate ’em.” We’re surrounded by couples enjoying their Valentine’s Day brunches in the restaurant’s back lot. “They make me so uncomfortable. Maybe just kissing in public. There’s a gaffer, there’s a cameraman, there’s the video village over there. I don’t know, it’s an intimate moment. It’s weird.”

When we start talking about intimacy offscreen, Washington unconsciously folds his arms across his chest. It’s a chilly day for L.A., but he’s got a denim jacket on. I don’t think he’s responding to the weather. “I’ve had a hard time trusting people because of my family, so my relationships have faltered because of that a bit,” Washington says. He adds almost immediately, “It’s Valentine’s Day, and I’m doing an interview.” We look at each other and laugh. “I’m still looking, I’m welcoming it all. I’m content, not forcing anything, just like in the work. I used to have this desperation to prove myself to so many people, prove that I’m my own man. But at what cost? That has subsided.”

I find this more persuasive than what he said earlier. “Now, I’m just more mature,” he adds. “If I believe in what I do, which is God, and that I’m serving a bigger purpose, and I want Him to move me and make my decisions, that means I can’t panic. I have to exemplify that faith by not

panicking in my decisions with my significant other or a role that I think is going to change my career.”

Spirituality is a big part of what grounds him. His parents are devout Christians who always stressed the value of prayer. And there was a literal “come to Jesus” moment back in college that solidified the role of religion in his life. During his junior year, he made a pact with God to help propel him to the NFL: a full year with no drinking, no smoking, only clean living. “I wouldn’t even listen to rap music, no curse words,” he says. “I was a freaking nun.” He ended up having the worst season of his career. He lost faith but came out of that spiritual crisis the following year, once he adjusted his definition of success, and then, most crucially, handed over control: “I told God, ‘I’ll never leave you again. That’s my bad, man. I’ll never leave you again.’”

Pauletta, too, has been instrumental in this transition to someone who can let go, give himself over completely, and share his vulnerabilities. She keeps him honest, and reminds him all the time to “understand your power,” he says. “And that doesn’t mean covering up your insecurities, so you think you just have to be a commando all the time. Sometimes it’s about how you listen. Some people think authority is strength and kindness is weakness. [But] you’re not giving love to expect it back; you’re giving love because this is how you live.”

If God is at the wheel of Washington’s life these days, he’s a damn good driver. The actor’s next project, the untitled David O. Russell movie, has him marveling every day at his co-stars, soaking up advice from masters like Bale, Rock, “Mr. De Niro.” “This cast is bananas, man,” Washington says, without recognizing that he’s part of why it’s bananas. “It’s crazy. It feels like all-star weekend on that set every day.”

He can’t reveal anything about the plot, or even the period in which the film is set, which has him sporting an old-fashioned Vandyke beard both times we meet. But in probing the era and his character, Washington has been exploring bigger questions of race in America – and finding himself both surprised and distressed.

“I’m dealing with the spirits of our people and what we’ve gone through in this country,” he says. “What being American means, what being an African American means, and the issues are so antiquated. It’s ‘history repeats itself’ [in] this film, this character. Really, the research was kicking me down a little bit, because we talked about hearing the same thing over and over again, saying the same things over and over again. And this character’s dealing with it head-on. This stuff I’ve researched I will have for life now. I’m going to continue to dig deep into the whys of what was going on in this country.”

The topic springboards us to a discussion about the expansiveness of black identity, and how the public’s perception of what black people can do and be has broadened, thanks in part to the film and television being made today, which finally reflects the breadth and diversity of our experiences. It’s a growing body of work that Washington feels both called to and excited to be a part of. “We’ve been eccentric, we’ve been a lot of things, but we had to hide it,” he says. “Now it’s embraced. Mr. Spike Lee, to me, was one of the first to display our differences, that we’re not just this single black thought, this one black way of being. We’re weird, we’re quirky, we’re hilarious, obviously. We’re not all the same. And that’s why I do what I do, too. To get to the specifics of why we’re so different. I see Donald Glover doing it, LaKeith [Stanfield]. Now, it’s celebrated to be different and black.”

For now, though, he’s focused on the Russell film. While the job has him back on the preparation train, he also says he’s taking more chances with it. He compares the process to football, how the game slows down as you get more experience. You see the field better, read the coverage.

I ask how good he thinks he is at this point. At first, he misunderstands the question. “In life, or?” No, no, in the art. “Oh. I was like, ‘That’s a big question. Man, I’m terrible at life. I’m still working on this,’” he cracks. “‘How much time do you have,’ right?” There are still some things he’s working through. His sister Olivia has been encouraging him to paint again – bought him a canvas and some tools for Christmas a couple of years back that he has yet to use. “I don’t know what I’m running from,” he says.

But when it comes to acting, he knows he’s good and only getting better: “I’m not even close to maximizing my potential. And it’s taken people I’ve worked with to help me tap into that voice or that anger, whatever it is, to be able to display it through a character.”

And does he feel he’s changing people’s minds through the work? “I don’t care if I do,” he says. “I’m not worried about that. It doesn’t fuel me anymore.”

Thinking about his methods and looking back over his body of work, I’m reminded of something Katia said about watching John David play ball at Morehouse: “They separate backs sometimes into the workhorse and the other guy. But he was both. He was the guy running it for the dirty two or three yards, and then he was the guy who could break out and have a huge play.”

He can do whatever needs to be done, in other words, be it quiet or loud, subtle or flashy. He’s the ultimate team player who’s also a superstar. In this new phase of his life, all that youthful angst has finally burned off. And in his own way, in the long run, he ended up following his father’s advice: He trusted the block. He saw the hole, and he didn’t hesitate.

Now John David Washington is running full speed ahead, a crowd rising to its feet, nothing in front of him but the end zone. **R**

“I used to have this desperation to prove myself, to prove I’m my own man. But at what cost?”



OUR LAST BEST CHANCE

With Biden in office, a serious plan to combat climate change is finally in our sights — but the clock is ticking, and there is no more room for error

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BY **JEFF GOODELL**

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HE EARTH'S CLIMATE has always been a work in progress. In the 4.5 billion years the planet has been spinning around the sun, ice ages have come and gone, interrupted by epochs of intense heat. The highest mountain range in Texas was once an underwater reef. Camels wandered in evergreen forests in the Arctic. Then a few million years later, 400 feet of ice formed over what is now New York City. But amid this geologic mayhem, humans have gotten lucky. For the past 10,000 years, virtually the entire stretch of human civilization, people have lived in what scientists call "a Goldilocks climate" — not too hot, not too cold, just right.

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Now, our luck is running out. The industrialized nations of the world are dumping 34 billion tons or so of carbon into the atmosphere every year, which is roughly 10 times faster than Mother Nature ever did on her own, even during past mass extinction events. As a result, global temperatures have risen 1.2 C since we began burning coal, and the past seven years have been the warmest seven years on record. The Earth's temperature is rising faster today than at any time since the end of the last ice age, 11,300 years ago. We are pushing ourselves out of a Goldilocks climate and into something entirely different — quite literally, a different world than humans have ever lived in before. How hot will the summers get in India and Pakistan, and how will tens of thousands of deaths from extreme heat impact the stability of the region (both nations have nuclear weapons)? How close is the West Antarctic ice sheet to collapse, and what does the risk of five or six feet of sea-level rise mean for people living in mobile homes on the Gulf Coast? The truth is, no one knows for sure. We are in uncharted terrain. "We're now in a world where the past is no longer a good guide to the future," said Jesse Jenkins, an assistant professor of engineering at Princeton University. "We have to get much better at preparing for the unexpected."

By all indications, President Biden and his team understand all this. And it's hard not to feel that after 30 years of dithering and denial and hypocrisy, the fight to save the climate has finally begun in earnest. In the 2020 election, nearly 70 percent of Biden's voters said climate change was a top issue for them. Biden has staffed his administration with the climate A-team, from Gina McCarthy as domestic climate czar to John Kerry as international climate envoy. He has made racial and environmental justice a top priority. And perhaps most important of all, he sees the climate crisis as an opportunity to reinvent the U.S. economy and create millions of new jobs. "I think in Obama's mind, it was always about tackling the climate challenge, not making the climate challenge the central element of your economic policy," says John Podesta, a Democratic power broker and special adviser to President Obama who played a key role in negotiating the Paris Agreement. "Biden's team is different. It is really the core of their economic strategy to make transformation of the energy systems the driver of innovation, growth, and job creation, justice and equity."

Of course, there have been hopeful moments before: the signing of the Kyoto Protocol in 1997, when the nations of the world first came to-



gether to limit CO₂ emissions; the success of Al Gore's documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* in 2006; the election of Obama in 2008 ("This was the moment when the rise of the oceans began to slow and our planet began to heal," Obama said in his speech accepting the Democratic presidential nomination that year); the Paris Agreement in 2015, when China finally engaged in climate talks. But all of these moments, in the end, led to nothing. If you look at the only metric that really matters – a graph of the percentage of CO₂ molecules in the atmosphere – it has been on a long, steady upward climb. More CO₂ equals more heat. To put it bluntly, all our scientific knowledge, all the political speeches, all the activism and protest marches have done zero to stop the accumulation of CO₂ in the atmosphere from the burning of fossil fuels.

But hope rises again. The economic winds are lifting Biden's sails: The cost of wind and solar power has plummeted by 90 percent or so over the past decade, and in many parts of the world it's the cheapest way to generate electricity. Meanwhile, fossil-fuel dinosaurs are tottering: Big Coal is collapsing in real time and may disappear from American life in the next decade or so. ExxonMobil lost \$22 billion last year and in August was delisted from the S&P 500. GM, long the staunch fossil-fuel loyal-

ist of the U.S. auto industry, has pledged to go all-electric by 2035.

Globally, the signs of change are equally inspiring. Eight of the 10 largest economies have pledged to reach net-zero emissions by 2050. China, by far the world's largest carbon polluter in terms of raw tonnage (on a per capita basis, the U.S. and several other countries pollute far more), has promised to go net zero by 2060. Some 400 companies, including Microsoft, Unilever, Facebook, Ford, Nestlé, and Pepsi, have committed to reduce carbon pollution consistent with the United Nations' 1.5 C target, which scientists have determined is the threshold of dangerous climate change. Big Money is also waking up to the risks and benefits of climate action. In his annual letter to investors, Larry Fink, the CEO of BlackRock, which manages \$7.8 trillion in assets, challenged companies "to disclose a plan for how their business model will be compatible with a net-zero economy." In her confirmation hearing, Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen called climate change "an existential threat" and promised to create a team to examine the risks and integrate them into financial policymaking.

Still, these are only baby steps in a very long journey. And the clock is ticking. "When it comes to the climate crisis," says futurist Alex

Steffen, "speed is everything." Every molecule of carbon we dump into the atmosphere is another molecule of carbon that will warm the climate for centuries to come, and in subtle and not-so-subtle ways, reshape the world we live in. The changes we are making are not reversible. If we magically stopped all carbon pollution tomorrow, the Earth's temperature would level off, but warm seas would continue melting the ice sheets and seas would keep rising for decades, if not centuries (last time carbon levels were as high as they are today, sea levels were 70 feet higher). Ocean acidification, caused by high CO₂ levels, is already dissolving coral reefs and is having a major impact on the ocean food chain. Even after emissions stop, it will take the ocean thousands of years to recover.

Cutting carbon fast would slow these changes and reduce the risk of other climate catastrophes. But despite the world's newfound ambition, political leaders are not moving anywhere near fast enough. Even the goal of holding future warming to 2 C, which is a centerpiece of the Paris Agreement and considered the outer limits of a Goldilocks climate for much of the planet, is nearly out of reach. As a recent paper in *Nature* pointed out: "On current trends, the probability of staying below 2 C of warming is only five percent." If all countries meet the

commitment they made in the 2015 Paris Agreement and continue to reduce emissions at the same rate after 2030, the paper argued, the probability of remaining below 2 C of warming rises to 26 percent (“As if a 26 percent chance was good,” Swedish climate wunderkind Greta Thunberg pointed out in a tweet).

The great danger is not climate denial. The great danger is climate delay. Instead of pushing for changes tomorrow, world leaders and CEOs like to make virtuous-sounding statements about what they will do in 2050. And then in 2050, they will make virtuous-sounding statements about what they will do in 2070. Climate scientist Zeke Hausfather calls this the “empty radicalism” of long-term goals.

What’s needed is action now. As climate envoy John Kerry put it at the World Sustainable Development Summit in February: “We have to now phase out coal five times faster than we have been. We have to increase tree cover five times faster than we have been. We have to ramp up renewable energy six times faster than we are. We have to transition to [electric vehicles] 22 times faster.”

As an example of the seriousness of Biden’s near-term ambition, he has proposed transitioning to 100 percent clean electricity by 2035, which means goodbye natural-gas plants, goodbye coal plants, and hello electric cars and battery storage. It’s an astonishingly ambitious proposal, one that would require a remaking of the digital backbone of America at a breakneck speed. It will create hundreds of thousands of jobs, but if Biden is serious about getting it done, it will require retooling permitting laws and the environmental-review process that often stalls big infrastructure projects.

Demanding action now will also require shutting down the international financing schemes that support fossil fuels. China, Japan, and South Korea all claim to be doing their part in making carbon reductions at home, while at the same time they are financing 70,000 megawatts of coal power in places like Bangladesh, Vietnam, and Indonesia. In addition, state-run oil companies in places like China, Indonesia, and Saudi Arabia are on course to spend more than \$400 billion over the next decade to expand oil infrastructure and exploration.

The goal of net-zero emissions is also problematic. “Net zero” is not the same thing as zero. It means that carbon pollution is either eliminated *or* offset by other processes that remove carbon from the atmosphere, such as forests or machines that capture CO₂. Some of these offsets and technologies are more legit than others, opening the door to scams that claim to eliminate more carbon than they do.

In a way, the economic chaos caused by the pandemic has created a historic opportunity for the Biden administration. As one White House

adviser tells me, “If you are going to pump billions of dollars into the economy, why not use those dollars to help us transition away from fossil fuels?” This is one of the central ideas behind Biden’s \$2 trillion infrastructure bill he’s pushing out this spring. The bill is likely to include a wide variety of climate-related initiatives, shaped around the twin pillars of Biden-era policy: clean-energy jobs and climate justice.

Already the pushback is fierce, especially in states that have benefited from the fracking boom. “The climate fight going forward is really about natural gas,” says Leah Stokes, author of *Short Circuiting Policy*, an analysis of how special interests have derailed clean-energy policy for 30 years. Shortly after Biden issued his first round of executive orders aimed at the climate crisis, Texas Gov. Greg Abbott held a press conference in the middle of the gas fields “to make clear that Texas is going to protect the oil-and-gas industry from any type of hostile attack launched from Washington, D.C.” In Florida, two bills were introduced that would preempt local governments from implementing plans to lower carbon pollution. In California and New York, residents are fighting transmission lines for offshore wind farms.

“We’re now in a world where the past is no longer a good guide to the future,” said one expert. “We have to get much better at preparing for the unexpected.”

None of this is surprising. And the fight will only get bigger and more ruthless as the clean-energy transition accelerates. Fossil fuels are emblematic of a culture, a way of life, a political hierarchy, and an empire of wealth that will not go quietly into the night.

EVEN AMONG CLIMATE activists and progressives, there is wide disagreement about the best path forward.


In Pennsylvania, Rep. Conor Lamb, a Democrat who supports Biden’s climate goals, sees natural gas as indispensable. “You can’t turn off natural gas in our society, at least in the Northeast of the United States at this time,” Lamb tells me. “You just can’t do it.” Lamb advocates investments in expensive and unproven technology like carbon capture that could extend the life of fossil fuels. Then there are the eternal battles over nuclear power as a source of clean energy, which Lamb also supports. Others, like UC Berkeley energy professor Dan-

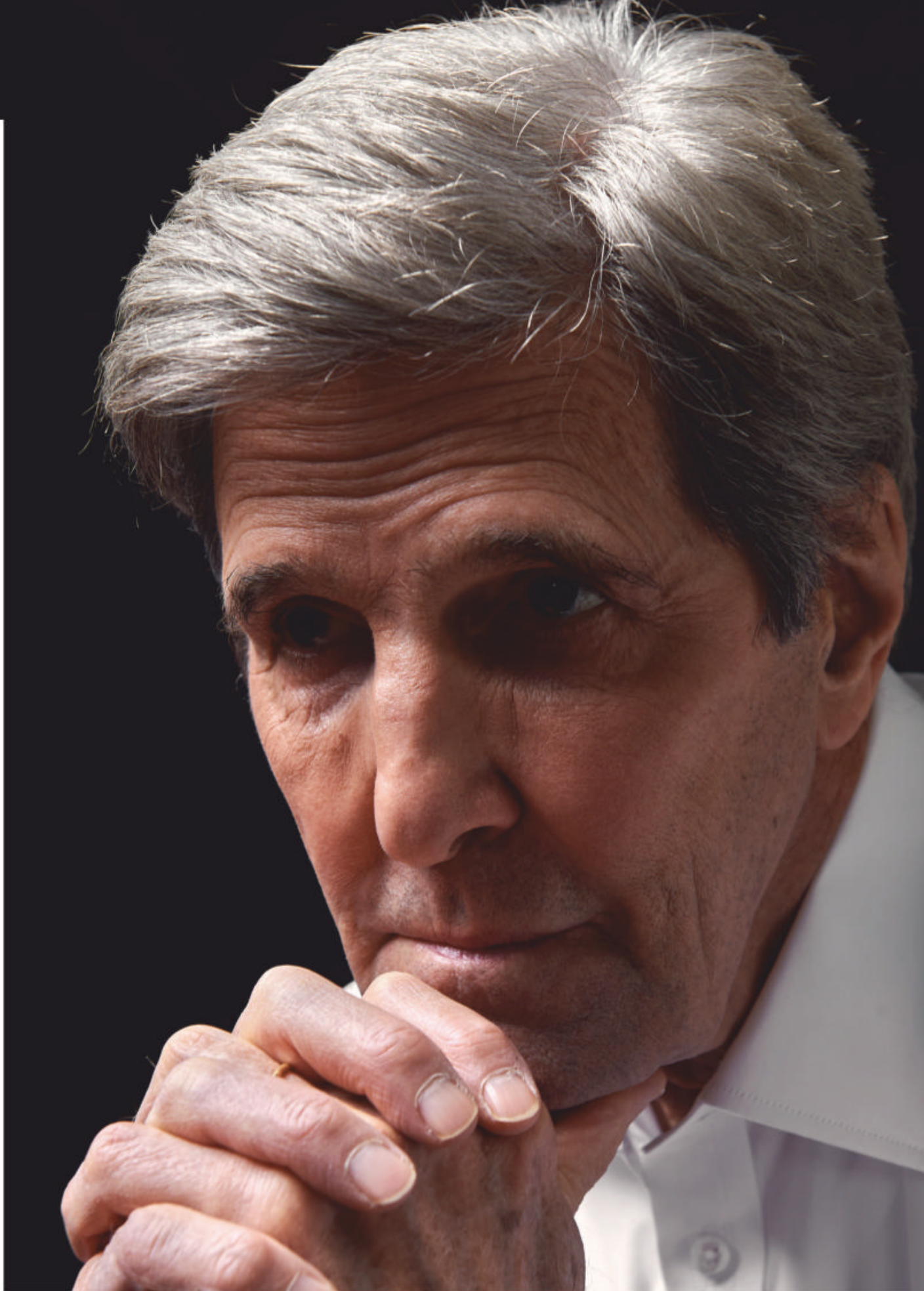
iel Kammen, remain skeptical: “If low-cost, reliable, entirely safe nuclear can prove itself out, this is wonderful. . . . But there’s a lot of big ifs.”

More important, the fight for a stable climate is increasingly inseparable from a fight for justice and equity. Catherine Coleman Flowers, who was on a task force that helped shape Biden’s climate policy during his campaign, grew up and works in Lowndes County, Alabama. “I see a lot of poverty here,” Flowers says. “And I see a lot of people who suffer from the impacts of climate change – whether it is heat, or disease, or poor sanitation and polluted drinking water. You can’t separate one from the other. They put sewage lagoons next to the houses of poor people, not rich people. They put oil pipelines through poor neighborhoods, not rich ones.”

Internationally, rich nations of the world pledged to “mobilize” \$100 billion by 2020 through the U.N.’s Green Climate Fund to help developing nations adapt to climate change. But only about \$10 billion materialized. The U.S. was among the worst actors: Of the \$3 billion President Obama promised, he funded only \$1 billion before Trump canceled further payments (Biden has promised to make good on the commitment, and then some).

Whatever happens with Biden’s climate and energy initiatives, we’re living in a new world now. The faster we cut carbon, the more manageable the changes will be. But change is coming. The biggest fights of the future are less likely to be about natural gas and nuclear power than about sea walls and migration policies. “Adaptation is not sexy,” says Alice Hill, who was an adviser to the Obama administration. “But it is inevitable.” As climate impacts escalate, dangerous techno-fixes, such as solar geo-engineering, which involves spraying particles into the stratosphere to reflect away sunlight and cool the planet, will likely become more tempting and more divisive, perhaps further diluting the will to quickly cut carbon pollution.

For more than 30 years now, scientists and politicians have been aware that our hellbent consumption of fossil fuels could push us out of the Goldilocks zone and force humans to live in a world we have never inhabited before. As Biden’s push for climate action gets real, we will learn a lot about how serious human beings are about living on this planet, and how far the powerful and privileged are willing to go to reduce the suffering of the poor and vulnerable. If political leaders don’t take the climate crisis seriously now, with all they know, with all they have been through already, will they ever? “Climate advocates keep saying, ‘This is it, this is it, this is it,’” warns Podesta. “But this really is it. If we don’t amp up and accelerate the energy transformation in this decade, we’re goners – really goners.” 



WILL AMERICA FINALLY LEAD ON CLIMATE?

John Kerry understands the urgency of the moment better than anyone — and now has more power than ever to act

// BY **JEFF GOODELL** PHOTOGRAPH BY **PHILIP KEITH**



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HEN JOHN KERRY was a kid, his mother took him for walks in the Massachusetts woods, where they often stopped and stood among the trees. “Just listen,” she told her son.

Whatever he heard, it stuck with him. Kerry, who is 77, has been on the front lines of the war for a habitable planet since the first Earth Day in 1970, when he was just back from Vietnam, carrying shrapnel in his leg and a Silver Star for bravery in combat. Over the past 30 years, Kerry has been a central player in virtually every climate conference and U.N. climate meeting (he first got to know his wife, Teresa, at the Rio Summit in 1992). He has talked about the climate crisis when it would have been politically astute to keep his mouth shut. He backed cap-and-trade legislation to limit carbon pollution when other politicians were running for cover. As President Obama’s secretary of state, he spent months brokering a complex deal with China that cleared the way for the 2015 Paris climate agreement, in which 150 countries agreed to limit carbon pollution. It was a hopeful moment. I was in Paris when the gavel fell, and I saw the exhausted smile on Kerry’s face when it was over. Maybe there was hope after all.

Then Trump happened. He immediately pulled the U.S. out of the Paris Agreement and encouraged the maximum consumption of fossil fuels. When asked about Trump’s leadership, Kerry pulled no punches. Trump is an “ignorant boor,” he told *ROLLING STONE* last year. “He is narcissistic to the point of distraction, easily manipulatable, and completely untrustworthy.” On climate, Kerry described Trump as “a one-man lying wrecking crew, walking around destroying relationships, years of effort, and people’s belief in science and in American values.”

But now Trump is gone and Kerry is again a commanding officer in the climate war. A few weeks after the election, President Biden offered him the job of international climate envoy, a newly created post that makes Kerry part of Biden’s Cabinet as well as gives him a seat on the National Security Council. Kerry’s prominence and power within the administration is a sign of just how seriously Biden takes the climate crisis. Kerry’s mission: Restore American leadership in international climate policy and push for greater ambition in the next round of U.N. climate talks, which will be held in Glasgow later this year. Nobody knows what’s at stake better than Kerry. If we fail, he said in a speech to the U.N. Security Council a few days after we talked for this interview, the nations of the world will be “marching forward in what is almost tantamount to a mutual suicide pact.”

You were secretary of state and on your way back from a trip to Antarctica when Trump was elected in 2016. At the time, the Paris Agreement had just been ratified and was gaining momentum. Then for four years under Trump, everything went backward. What does it feel like to return to the climate fight now?

Well, I think we've been given a grace moment where we have an opportunity to make up for four terribly lost years, destructive years, that had no basis in science, no basis in fact. And that, unfortunately, unleashed among reluctant nations a permissiveness that expanded beyond just the United States' absence. We have an opportunity here to try to make up for lost time and we have a huge obligation to do so, because the consequences of the climate crisis are becoming more clear by the day.

Everywhere in the world we're seeing the impact on communities. In 2020 alone, we spent over \$100 billion just recovering from natural disasters. A couple of years before that, we spent several-hundred billion on Hurricanes Maria and Harvey and Irma. 2020 had a record-breaking 30 named storms, and setting another record, 12 of them made landfall in the United States. We saw a positively ruthless wildfire season in 2020. California's experience was twice as severe as the previous record-breaking season for land area burned, and we had four mega fires, at one point, raging in Oregon all at the same time.

You run the list of these things and common sense says, "Listen to the scientists, look at the facts. Evaluate them." The imperative for us to get back in to help lead toward a successful Glasgow meeting could not be higher, and that's why the president has decided to make climate such a critical focus in his administration.

How do you restore trust in American leadership? How do you convince other nations that we mean what we're going to say and we're not going to reverse it again after the next election?

I believe personally and very deeply that economics are going to take this over, and that if we do our work over the course of these next years with the rest of the world, no individual politician will be able to undo the reality, the new reality, that will be defined by the steps we take. If China, and India, and the United States of America, and Europe, and Russia, and all these countries join together and they decide that we must reduce our emissions, we must invest in new technologies, we have to put trillions on the line over the course of these next years, there will be such an economic shift in nations that no biased demagogue is going to be able to undo that in any nation whatsoever, because the marketplace will have made such a commitment and moved so far in its transfor-

mation. It's like the Industrial Revolution, they all seized it and rode the wave. That's part of the challenge we have today, and this is what's going to happen: New technologies are going to come out, carbon storage, battery storage, electric vehicles. This is the future. And Donald Trump was an aberration, he was a hiccup in the digestive system of history. I'm telling you, he couldn't undo this if he tried. No one could.

I agree with the larger technological revolution; it's happening. I think the real question is speed. How fast does it all happen? The track we're on, even if everyone fulfills the commitments they made in the Paris Agreement, we're still not going to get below 2 C, much less 1.5 C.

When you say we're not going to get below 2 C, there is still evidence that if the right decisions were made and people moved fast enough you could keep 1.5 alive, and that's certainly one of the goals of Glasgow. But it's not guaranteed. I agree with you. On the current pace, the current track, that's not happening.

So what tools do you have to increase leverage, to increase ambition to get stuff going now, as opposed to, say, a decade from now?

"This is the future. And Donald Trump was an aberration, a hiccup in the digestive system of history. I'm telling you, he couldn't undo this if he tried. No one could."

Example, power of example. I think the United States has to take the steps. President Biden has a very ambitious Build Back Better infrastructure initiative. I think that job possibilities will push us in that direction. I think that there was very fast growth in the renewable sector, prior to Trump, so pulling the rug out from under it, and Covid, of course, has hit it hard. But we will get out of Covid and move on, and I think there will be very significant growth in these sectors. I'm talking all the time to innovators and investors who are moving in a very different direction now, in terms of where they put their money and where they think they can make money.

With President Biden's infrastructure bill, there's going to be a huge number of new jobs created that are good union, blue-collar, well-paying jobs. Whether it's in heavy equipment or construction, in all kinds of different endeavors, as we build out America's grid, as we build charging stations in the country.

The Biden plan [includes] converting 500,000 school buses to electric. Those are jobs. So in my judgment, this thing is going to gain momentum, and the competition globally will have a big impact on the allocation of capital.

Speaking of allocation of capital, compared with 2015, when you were working toward Paris, how has Covid shaped the conversation about climate? Obviously it's been a big economic blow to many nations.

I think people are beginning to realize that Covid and climate are integrally linked. Climate will augment potential for more pandemics. Climate changes the cycle of nature, and when that cycle changes, certain diseases can spread more easily. So I think the pandemic has woken people up to the fragility of life itself, and the interconnectedness of nations in ways that just underscore we're all in this together.

One of the things that international progress is really dependent on is China. I was in China with you in 2015. I know how hard you worked to build that relationship. I know how fragile and complicated that relationship was, and how much that meant to the success of the Paris Agreement. How would you describe the relationship with China now? Trump spent a lot of time trashing China, and there are a lot of issues, from the Uyghurs to the South China Sea.

Well, I think we just have to deal with reality. The reality is there are some tough issues between the United States and the rest of the world, and China. Everybody knows what [those issues] are. Some of them have been enduring for a long period of time, whether it's Taiwan or Hong Kong, or the violence with the Uyghurs and Tibet. And particularly on the economic front and cyber front, there is conflict, and that has to be worked through. But on climate, I think the Chinese understand, and I think we understand, that climate's not going to wait. It's not going to wait [for] the Chinese, or the Americans, or the Russians. This is an issue on which we have to collaborate.

This is like Reagan going to Reykjavik and meeting with Gorbachev, where we had the 40,000 or 50,000 warheads facing each other; and despite Reagan's view of the "Evil Empire" and despite the realities of our differences, we made progress. We came up with the START Treaty, we moved in the other direction, and now instead of 50,000, we have 1,500. The world is safer, I think, for it. Same thing needs to happen here. You take a step and hopefully that step can allow you to take other steps. But my portfolio is, by virtue of the president's decision, to offer genuine, significant leadership on this issue, to work this issue and not get caught up in the others, and not get side-tracked, and hope that by virtue of doing that we open other possibilities.



You and I traveled to the Norfolk [Virginia] naval base together a few years ago and talked about the national security implications of climate change. I know this is a big concern for you. What can you do to bring your colleagues and other nations along in understanding the urgency of this?

Well, the president asked me to serve as a member of the National Security Council because he knows that climate change is not just an environmental issue; it's an economic issue, it's a public-health issue, and, yes, it's a national-security issue. And the Pentagon for a long time has called climate change "a threat multiplier," because that's what the impacts of climate change do. They make so many of the other threats and challenges we face harder to confront. When you have whole regions that are experiencing food-production interruption, or you have regions where the water isn't flowing the way it used to, or it's so hot that you feel like you've got to move to another place in order to exist, that can breed conflict. It breeds the movement of mass numbers of people, which places pressure in other nations. We saw this in Europe with the movement of people from Syria, from Turkey, out into Europe. It changed the politics of Europe profoundly.

Military installations are also at risk, that's why we went to Norfolk, as you recall. The U.S. has spent billions already repairing damage to Camp Lejeune in North Carolina and the Tyn-dall Air Force Base in Florida in the wake of these extreme weather moments, and those storms are only growing stronger as the planet

Leading the Charge Kerry on his Antarctica trip in November 2016, where he learned Trump was elected

warms. In Alaska, you've got U.S. military facilities at risk because the permafrost on which those facilities are built is thawing. You have places that have warmer climates, where there are days when it's just too damn hot for troops to train with live ammunition or to get in the kind of training they were in previously. It just changes everything.

Let's talk about climate justice, which is always a complicated issue. The U.S. is still, what, \$2 billion behind in the Green Climate Fund from what President Obama committed to?

Correct.

How does the U.S. make up that gap, and what does the U.S. do to help developing nations adapt to the climate crisis?

We have an obligation to take the leadership role in helping to make sure that the Green Climate Fund is fully funded and to make sure we're doing our part. I have made a recommendation to the president as to what I think we ought to do here, and we'll have to wait for a presidential decision as to how we're going to do it. But there's no question that we've got to step up and get other nations to step up. It's an insult to everybody that the developed world, which made this commitment in Paris for \$100 billion, has never really ponied up the full amount. We're working very hard right

now, already, to begin to build a consensus for how we should approach this.

I am also working very hard right now on a major approach to finance, and finance will be a topic during our summit in April. Because without finance – and I'm talking about well more than the \$100 billion, which is really a transitional fund to help less-developed nations afford certain technologies they can't get today. But we need to do much more than that. The U.N. finance report tallies up, literally, trillions of dollars per year of gap in the finance necessary to, overall, deal with the challenge of the climate crisis. And so I'm talking with various people around the world, and the World Bank, the IMF, the private sector, to see what we can do to accelerate a focus of investment, because without trillions of dollars over the next 10, 15, 20 years, this is not going to get done.

You've been involved in this climate fight for a long time. There have been lots of pivotal moments — or what, at the time, felt like pivotal moments. How does this moment feel to you?

More compelling. More urgent. And perhaps more understandable by more people in more places. I sense that many more countries, many more leaders, many more private-sector entities are seized of the issue than previously, and if we can help organize that and marshal the energies in the right direction, we can get something important done. For instance, joint-venturing and cooperation on particular technology tracks. There may be ways here to accelerate the transformation, which is what we have to do. The urgency has to be acted on. I view our role as helping to accelerate the efforts toward Glasgow, which, I believe, is the last best hope for the world to set a road map that is transparent, and accountable, to get to net zero by 2050 or earlier. And I emphasize the word "earlier," to try to keep alive the prospect of holding the warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius.

That's the challenge, and it has to be real. There can be no faking it, no glossing over. In Paris we had the privilege of countries coming together because we hadn't done this previously. China had been in opposition to what we were doing in Copenhagen, and Copenhagen failed in 2009 because we were divided. So that's why I went to China in 2013 and negotiated with President Xi. We forged a partnership. We have to go further than that this time – it has to be a broader partnership – but it's doable. And if we do that, I think we could have the greatest global economic transformation that the world has ever gone through, and one that would benefit all people with cleaner air, better health, less cancer, less asthma, and greater security. It is doable. The question is whether or not we have the willpower to make the decisions that will make it happen. ®

A P R I L 2 0 2 1



KING OF THE ROAD

Pete Buttigieg's quest to flip the script on infrastructure reform and turn the Department of Transportation green

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BY **RYAN BORT**

PHOTOGRAPH BY
LYNDON FRENCH



PETE BUTTIGIEG, the man now responsible for managing the means by which Americans travel trillions of miles per year, can't leave his house. Just days after he was confirmed as secretary of transportation, a member of his security detail tested positive for Covid-19, forcing the newly minted Cabinet member to start turning the wheels on his agenda from quarantine. "We're trying to practice what we preach, right?" he says of the decision to stay home. He's trying his best to hide his exasperation.

A little frustration is understandable. The Covid scare meant Buttigieg had to attend his first Oval Office meeting via flatscreen, and as far as get-

ting a revamped, eco-centric approach to transportation in gear, it was a big one. Biden and a virtual Secretary Pete sat down with a bipartisan group of senators to discuss a new – and hopefully very green – infrastructure bill. Passing one under Trump became a joke (remember "Infrastructure Week"?), but with coastal highways collapsing and power grids failing, there's no time to laugh. Republicans have said they'll work with Democrats, but there's plenty of reason to be wary that they'll agree to fund some of the climate-focused initiatives Democrats want to include in the bill. "It's so important that we actually get it done," Buttigieg says, "and not allow infrastructure to continue to be something that people will roll their eyes at."

There's no reason transportation, currently the largest source of greenhouse-gas pollution in the nation, has to be such a liability in the fight against climate change. Buttigieg is confident in both the administration's ability to come to terms with conservatives and in his department's ability to reimagine how America moves itself around.

A big part of taking on climate change for the DOT is going to come down to passing an infrastructure bill. How do you make this a bipartisan issue again, especially considering some of the climate-related measures you're going to want to include in it?

It's an abundantly bipartisan issue among the American people. That much is clear. The challenge is to make sure that bipartisan support is actually reflected here in Washington. So how do we do it? I think it's making sure that we are responsive to all the different needs and interests at the table, from our biggest cities to a lot of rural areas, that have not always been made to feel like infrastructure has a lot to offer them. It means understanding the relationship between what you might call hard infrastructure, like roads and rails, and digital infrastructure, a very important part of how we address underserved areas that have been cut off from the kind of broadband access they need.

The other thing we've got to do is be relentlessly focused on job creation here, because what we're also talking about when we're talking about infrastructure is the economic strength of the United States, and that should be a bipartisan priority, especially if we're considering, frankly, our slipping competitiveness with regard to a lot of countries that have not hesitated to make big infrastructure investments.

What are some of the short-term things the DOT can do right now, without Congress, to take on climate change? I know you already announced \$180 million in grants, including allotments for zero- and low-emission bus lines. What's the next step?

Going forward, with any discretionary infrastructure grants, you're going to see an attention to climate impacts and an attention to racial and economic impacts that maybe hasn't always been there in the past but is absolutely going to be there going forward. Some of it's just what we try to promote in terms of work that communities are already doing. This is why things like [walkable and bikeable] "complete streets" are so important. If they can encourage some of that mode-shifting that recognizes that not every trip needs to be in a single-occupant vehicle, that has a climate impact. The way we team up with [Housing and Urban Development] on transit-oriented development [which emphasizes access to public transportation] may involve legislation, but a lot of it doesn't have to. Then, internally, we're going to try to set the right example just in terms of our own fleet. It may be a small piece of the bigger puzzle, but it's a chance to lead by example.

Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine put out a budget proposal that cuts Ohio's public transportation fund by 90 percent, which is a reminder that a lot of these key decisions are going to be made on state and local levels. How can the DOT affect change there, especially considering some of the budgetary constraints resulting from the pandemic?

We want to work with any state or local or tribal or territorial authority that's seeking to do the right thing. This is not about pressure. This is about resources. Let me also say that one thing I've noticed here in Washington is that people say "state and local" like it's one word. To me, even though all the attention around here is on the relationship between the federal government and the states, I think the most interesting relationships in federalism are between cities and towns and everybody else. If you've got a community that's out trying to do the right thing, maybe they don't feel like they have a friend in their own state capitol. They're going to have a friend in Washington.

Cars and trucks are the biggest greenhouse-gas emitters in the country. President Obama called for a five percent increase in efficiency year over year. President Trump knocked that down to 1.5 percent. How do you plan to approach fuel-efficiency standards? Is reverting to Obama's requirement going far enough?

I can tell you that we're going to be looking for more, not less, climate ambition. The real balance is how much do we concentrate on the tailpipe issue versus supporting the development of EVs [electric vehicles] across the board? Government has a tendency to focus on limiting or proscribing what we don't want. Sometimes you've got to do that, that's what regulation is about. But it's just as important to support what we do want.

THE FUTURE OF ELECTRIC VEHICLES

Industry and government are finally on the same page about where the auto industry is headed — and for us it means cleaner air and healthier lives



CARS AND TRUCKS are responsible for a whopping 20 percent of the U.S.'s warming emissions, but that could be changing drastically in the coming years. The much-heralded, long-delayed future of the electric car is finally coming into view. The next two decades will see more than 320 million electric vehicles hit the roads, according to the research firm Wood Mackenzie, with annual sales reaching 45 million by 2040.

In January, GM announced it would phase out combustion engines in its consumer cars and trucks by 2035. Ford followed suit in February, announcing it would sell only electric vehicles by 2030 in Europe. That continent's biggest automaker, Volkswagen, has staked a \$90 billion bet on electrifying its vehicles, and plans to produce more than 20 million electric cars this decade. Volvo plans to sell only electric vehicles by 2030, with its chief technologist insisting, "There is no long-term future for cars with an internal combustion engine." Even Toyota, which has long pushed hybrid vehicles, announced in February that it will launch a pair of all-electric cars for 2022.

The barriers for consumers are continuing to drop as well. Electric vehicles are no longer just playthings for the wealthy. There are nearly a dozen EVs on the U.S. market already that are priced below \$40,000, which are even cheaper after a \$7,500 federal tax rebate. Charging times are also dropping — with some models needing just 15 minutes for 200 miles' worth of juice — and ranges are increasing, with the top EVs traveling more than 350 miles per charge.

The models are also growing more varied, from sport cars to subcompacts, with a slate of electric pickup trucks, including a Ford F-150, set to hit the market in the next few years. The research firm AutoPacific projects American consumers will have 100 EV models to choose from by 2030. And the infrastructure to charge them is following suit: Shell just announced plans to create a global network of 500,000 stations — up from 60,000 today — by 2025. **TIM DICKINSON**



GM has pledged to stop producing gas-powered vehicles by 2035. What kind of role can the DOT play in pressuring automakers to cut emissions and go electric?

I think DOT should be an engine within the administration of supporting market-making — for example, the overall electrification of the federal fleet. Most of those vehicles are not owned by DOT, but we could be facilitating some of that work, and that creates more and more of a market for EVs, writ large. There are things you can do to change the fundamental economics of this, and that's what the \$7,500 tax credit [for electric vehicles] is all about. But as costs continue falling to where they're really at parity with internal-combustion cars, which I think is pretty close at hand, then the biggest obstacle stops being price and starts being range anxiety. That's something where I think there's absolutely a federal role. This is the importance of the president's goal of half a million EV charging stations around the country.

A unique aspect to your new role is the amount of name recognition you have and the amount of attention that stands to bring to a department that doesn't typically get a lot of it. To what extent is taking advantage of this part of your thinking?

There's nothing I love more than bringing attention to an unglamorous topic that deserves more attention. Even as mayor, I was an evangelist for smart sewer technology because it was, in my view, really exciting. So I'm relishing the opportunity to do that with a lot of things in transportation, some of them well understood and already considered fairly sexy in the policy world, some of them pretty obscure.

What are some of these more "obscure," unsexy elements of transportation policy you'd like to use your position to shine a light on?

The intimate connection of unsexy transportation decisions to some of the most important issues of our moment around climate and justice are huge. I can't think of maybe a less-sexy phrase for some people than "land use." But when I'm thinking about automated vehicles and the challenges that presents, it's not just the safety and the operational questions of the vehicle; it's what happens in a world where we don't need nearly as many surface parking lots because most people experience cars as a service rather than as a possession. For any mayor who has agonized over how to get a compelling job-creating development deal done because you couldn't find room for parking, that's fascinating. Tantalizing even. Not everyone feels that fingertips-tingling about zoning and land use. But to me, those are the stakes just as much as being in a slick, hypermodern pod shuttling you around the metropolis of the future. **R**

GINA MCCARTHY IS BACK IN CHARGE

The former EPA head is now Biden's domestic climate czar, on a mission to harness the federal government's might to stop climate change

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BY ANDY KROLL



GINA MCCARTHY logged on to Zoom one day in early February and saw a crowd of Cabinet secretaries and other agency chiefs staring back at her, a Brady Bunch of senior bureaucrats. It

was the first meeting of the Biden administration's National Climate Task Force, a team of nearly two dozen top officials from across the government in charge of jump-starting Biden's "whole-of-government" climate agenda.

To lead it, Biden turned to McCarthy, a 66-year-old New Englander (with the chewy Boston accent to prove it) who knows a thing or two about how to wield executive power in the fight against climate change. As the head of the EPA under President Obama, she led the creation of the Clean Power Plan, the first national emissions limits for power plants, and a slew of other environmental actions.

Now, McCarthy is one of Biden's two top lieutenants, along with former Secretary of State John Kerry, leading what climate experts describe as the most ambitious climate-policy agenda of any president in history.

How is Biden's "whole-of-government" approach different from Obama's approach? President Obama pulled together a plan, but that plan had discrete tasks. It did not bring it all together under one task force with one overwhelming theme, which is to use every tool at your disposal in every agency and to start thinking about climate change in every decision you make. President Biden is all about using climate change not to address just the planetary problem, but really to use it as a way to rebuild the economy.



The administration's goal is for 40 percent of the benefits of climate policies to go to disadvantaged communities. How will the public be able to know that progress is being made on that?

One of the things that President Biden called for was a White House Environmental Justice Advisory Council. The reason to have that is really twofold. One, this is going to have scorecards. We're actually going to look at what every single agency is doing or not doing and provide the public with all kinds of information. And part of this task force is really about early engagement. We're not here to tell environmental-justice communities what they *ought* to want. We are here to say, "Forty percent of the investments we're making on clean energy are going to be used to benefit your communities. How can we make sure they're providing the benefits that *you* want?"

In regard to Trump's assault on environmental protections, which of his rollbacks are you most concerned about, and how hard are they going to be to undo?

Some of the ones early out of the gate are going to be methane. There was a rule [under Obama] that required methane to be captured from leaks in the oil-and-gas sector. We're going to revisit that, reestablishing that rule.

We've already told people that 2035 is the time window for cleaning up the power sector. And so we're having conversations with the utility sector, and that's going to involve not just standard-setting but also making sure that we look at transmission bottlenecks or other opportunities to make that transition to clean energy, which the utilities are not arguing about. They're just looking for help to see how they can make that [2035] window work.

And the third is we're looking at the auto sector. We're going to start talking to car manufacturers about how quickly we can get to zero [emissions] in the car fleet.

The president's executive orders try to meet the needs of coal communities. But of course, there's skepticism. Why should they think and feel differently about the Biden administration's pledges to reinvent those communities and get people to work?

The opportunity that we have here is to understand that coal is not competitive. It is not winning in the clean-energy future. We know what we have to do to address climate change. So there's an opportunity that the president's trying to capture, to say, "That doesn't mean you can't have a productive and economically viable community." And so we've identified opportunities for that – for the transition of skills that are useful in coal mining and in coal-based utilities, in the oil-and-gas sector – that we hope will be able to get some resources through legislation and other means.

So it's not about deciding today that their jobs don't matter. It's about recognizing that that transition is happening; it's going to continue to happen. If you look at the renewable numbers back in 2020, we had a huge increase in both solar and wind. And most of that increase was in states that have Republican senators. This is about recognizing where the future is and how we capture it again. We have to advance manufacturing. We have to be the clean-energy country if we want to compete against China and get those jobs here instead of elsewhere. You're not going to build that on the technologies of the past. ®



Regan at North Carolina's Lake Crabtree in February

HOW MICHAEL REGAN PLANS TO FIX THE EPA

The 44-year-old must restore a depleted agency while implementing the most ambitious climate agenda in history

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BY **ANDY KROLL**

PHOTOGRAPH BY
JEREMY M. LANGE



ONE BY ONE, the witnesses described the stench, a rancid odor that befouled the air and ruined your clothes, made you close your windows in the summer and run from your car into church on Sundays lest you bring that smell into God's house. They talked about undrinkable tap water and swarms of yellow flies. The cause of this pestilence, they said, were the hog farms, sprawling industrial operations that disposed of vast amounts of pig shit by sinking it in lagoons or spraying it across fields. To live near one of these farms was to live in an environmental nightmare.

North Carolina is home to some 2,000 swine farms and nearly 10 million hogs. In 1995, the bursting of a hog-farm lagoon in the town of Jack-

sonville sent 28.5 million gallons of waste into a tributary of the New River. After years of raising the alarm about the industry's reckless practices, environmental groups filed a civil rights complaint in 2014 on behalf of the black, Hispanic, and Native American communities near those farms, asking the Environmental Protection Agency to "protect communities of color from the injustice of being forced to live and work near inadequately regulated industrial pollution sources."

The Republican Party that controlled North Carolina's government offered no help in the fight. Then, in 2016, Democrat Roy Cooper won the governorship. He named as his top environmental regulator a young policy expert named Michael Regan.

Regan's appointment was cause for optimism among environmental activists. He was a former EPA employee who pledged to rebuild the state's Department of Environmental Quality after years of funding cuts, industry-friendly policies, and the sidelining of its scientists. He was also a black man from eastern North Carolina who knew about the daily indignities of living close to industrial hog farms. His agency had "a special obligation to the underserved and underrepresented," he said. Quoting a Civil War commander, he vowed to advocate for those communities: "Let's fight them till hell freezes over, and then we'll fight them on the ice."

Five years later, he faces a far larger battle. Chosen by President Joe Biden to lead the EPA, Regan, 44, takes over an agency that perhaps more than any other suffered under the Trump administration's assault on science, incestuous relationship with industry, and undermining of career public servants. The Trump cronies who ran the EPA cuddled up to coal and oil companies, helped gut more than 100 regulations, and tarnished the agency with one cartoonishly corrupt scandal after another. (Remember Scott Pruitt's secret phone booth?) Almost 700 scientists left the agency in the first three years of Trump's presidency, and only half of those vacancies were filled, according to *The Washington Post*.

Regan, who will be the first black man to run the EPA, tells ROLLING STONE that rebuilding the agency is his first priority. "We have world-renowned experts at EPA," he says. "We should be listening to them, and we will." With the Biden administration vowing to use every bit of executive power to tackle climate change, a revitalized EPA will be at the center of its ambitious targets to reduce emissions. "I will be laser-focused on methane," Regan says of the potent greenhouse gas released in natural-gas operations. He lists environmental justice and water quality as his other priorities, but guiding his approach on all of these ambitions is the belief that what's good for the planet can also be

good for workers and for business – a conviction Biden shares. “All of those priorities that I just laid out will be good for people, the planet, and profit,” Regan says. His personal philosophy is one “of trying to meet people where they are, understand everyone’s challenges, whether it’s an individual or a company, and then think through, ‘How do you get to the solution in a way that can possibly work?’”

Every good politician knows to say this. But judging from his tenure as North Carolina’s top environmental official, Regan means it. For better, and sometimes for worse.

REGAN’S environmental education began in the woods and rivers outside his hometown of Goldsboro, in eastern North Carolina, population 40,000. On weekends, he fished and hunted with his dad and grandfather. “It was all about getting out before the break of day and seeing who’s going to catch the first fish and the biggest fish,” he remembers.

Regan’s grandfather didn’t have more than a formal sixth-grade education. But when they walked in the woods together, his granddad rattled off the names of the trees they passed, holding court about the plants and animals native to the region. “You look up to your father, but your grandfather’s just that next level, like that’s *dad’s* dad,” Regan says. Yet there were times when a respiratory condition that flared up on low-air-quality days forced Regan to stay indoors. If the walks with his grandfather nurtured a love of the outdoors, those days stuck inside sparked a curiosity about the connection between nature and pollution.

After studying environmental science at North Carolina A&T, the country’s largest historically black university, Regan leveraged an EPA internship into a slot in the agency’s two-year management-training program in Washington, D.C. On the second or third day, he says, he wanted to thank then-EPA chief Carol Browner for supporting the program. So Regan, a lowly trainee oblivious to the concept of “controlled correspondence,” sent Browner, his boss’s boss’s boss, an email. It was caught by a senior staffer who, in Regan’s recollection, “thanked me for my enthusiasm but asked me to refrain from emailing the administrator.”

He spent the next decade at the EPA, spanning the last two years of the Clinton presidency and most of George W. Bush’s administration. His time there introduced him “to the connection of policy, politics, and regulation,” he says. “To look at where we wanted to be as an agency on the policy issues and navigate the politics of the day, to navigate selling that vision to Congress and to the White House.” But the Bush-era EPA’s lackluster investment in environmental justice, as well as its controversial

decision not to regulate greenhouse gases as air pollutants under the Clean Air Act, left Regan frustrated and conflicted. “It was tough because the work at EPA was very important,” he says. “The choice was, as an individual, where do I think I can make the biggest change?”

In 2008, he went to the Environmental Defense Fund, where he worked to retire coal plants in North Carolina and urge big utilities like Duke Energy to offer their customers more renewable-energy options. In the run-up to the 2016 election, a friend told him to check out then-Attorney General Cooper’s bid for governor of North Carolina. Cooper’s pledge to fight climate change by driving economic growth through clean energy clicked with Regan, and when Cooper won, Regan put his name forward for a policy job. Instead, Cooper picked him to run the state’s top environmental regulator, the Department of Environmental Quality.

JUST AS he will at the EPA, Regan inherited a beleaguered agency and a portfolio of crises at the DEQ. Right before he started, the EPA had sent a 23-page “letter of concern” to Regan’s predecessor. After a lengthy investigation into the complaint

“We’re not going to regulate our way out of this,” Regan says. “It really is: ‘How do we look at this in a more holistic way?’ You can find win-win opportunities.”

brought by communities that alleged racial discrimination due to the hog-farm pollution, the EPA said it had “deep concern about the possibility that African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans have been subjected to discrimination as the result of NC DEQ’s operation of the Swine Waste General Permit program.”


Regan’s approach to the hog-waste crisis, and his stewardship of DEQ writ large, give a glimpse of his strategy and style. First, he restored scientists’ rightful place in advising him on what actions to take. He launched the state’s first environmental justice and equity advisory board, which gave environmental activists a direct line to Regan himself. And he set out to hear from all the parties with a stake in the swine industry’s waste practices, holding hearings in affected communities as he decided what action he could and should take.

Regan tells me this hear-all-sides attitude is essential to the job of an environmental regulator. “We brought industry to the table,” he

says. “We brought communities to the table. We brought everyone to the table, and we had robust conversations and dialogues about what the agency can and cannot do, what the law allows, and what the science promotes.” He adds, “People did not always like the decision, obviously. But most of the time, our decision has been respected over the past four years because they were involved in the process.”

This collaborative approach garnered him results and admirers. He helped broker the largest coal-waste settlement in U.S. history, in which Duke Energy will absorb \$1.1 billion in costs to clean up coal-ash pits. He faced blowback in 2018 when DEQ approved a water permit for the Atlantic Coast Pipeline, which would have transported natural gas along the Eastern Seaboard (it has since been scrapped); but environmentalists cheered when DEQ rejected a more recent permit for a similar pipeline, called MVP Southgate, citing the “unnecessary risks to our environment.” Since his nomination, a coalition ranging from the Sierra Club to business leaders and Republican politicians has endorsed him. At his confirmation hearing, North Carolina Sen. Richard Burr, a life-long Republican, praised Regan as someone whose relationship with “rural communities” had been “constructive and not adversarial.”

That style has also earned him critics. The battle over hog waste went to remediation and led to a 2018 settlement hailed by one leading activist as “groundbreaking.” But lawyers for Big Ag and the pork industry challenged the deal and gutted some of the air- and water-quality protections in the updated swine permit. Environmental activists and lawyers say they wish Regan had used more of his executive authority to force the hog industry to end the lagoon and spray-field system. Instead, they say, he saw himself as more of a mediator, which ignored the power imbalance between the multi-billion-dollar hog industry and the affected residents. “It’s not an equal playing field,” says Elizabeth Haddix, an attorney for the Lawyers’ Committee on Civil Rights Under Law, which represented the citizens in the hog-waste case. “The industry controls everything here.”








Regan says he fought for the toughest possible restrictions while staying within the letter of the law, adding that he was disappointed by the court’s ruling. Battles like these, he says, only solidified his belief that forging consensus was essential to enacting environmental policies with staying power. That a top-down approach wasn’t the best way to make the changes the climate crisis demands. “We’re not going to regulate our way out of this,” he says. “It really is: ‘How do we look at it in a holistic way?’ There are multiple ways to do things, and you can find win-win opportunities. And typically those opportunities or solutions last the longest.” 



NEW TECH TO TACKLE THE CRISIS

Climate change can make us feel hopeless, but new technology can help the world kick the carbon habit. We already have market-ready solutions like solar, wind, and hydropower, and here are seven advances on the horizon that could make modern living more sustainable in the years ahead

// BY **TIM DICKINSON**

	 <p>TIDAL ENERGY</p>	 <p>GREEN CEMENT</p>	 <p>LOW-METHANE COWS</p>	 <p>FLOATING SOLAR</p>	 <p>ELECTRIC PLANES</p>	 <p>TREE CORRIDORS</p>	 <p>HYDROGEN SHIPS</p>
The Challenge	Tidal currents — a huge, largely untapped source of energy for coastal communities — have been hard to harness because the turbulent ocean waters can batter and damage the underwater equipment.	The world uses four gigatons of cement in construction annually. But it's a hidden carbon villain, requiring limestone to be heated to more than 2,700 degrees in a chemical reaction that also releases enormous quantities of CO ₂ .	Methane is 85 times more heat-trapping than CO ₂ , and grazing animals create a third of emissions. While cow farts get all the jokes, 95 percent of methane leakage actually comes out the front end, in belches.	Large solar installations are hard to site in densely populated countries with costly land or rugged terrain. Solar also produces intermittent power that must be supplemented by other energy sources.	Airplanes contribute about two percent of the world's carbon emissions, and battery-weight challenges have limited the development of electric planes. Pound for pound, jet fuel produces about 14 times more energy than a battery.	Sunbaked pavement and cement can create "urban heat islands" that exacerbate the extremes of climate change, turning heat waves more deadly and increasing energy demands for air conditioning.	Maritime shipping emissions contribute 2.5 percent of global CO ₂ , and big ships burn tons of low-quality "bunker fuel" that can foul the air of port communities with toxic particulates.
The Tech	In February, Sustainable Marine launched the world's first floating tidal-energy platform in Canada, a barge with six submersible turbines that can pivot with the tidal flow, creating steady power.	Solidia has developed a cement that can be fired at lower temperatures, cutting emissions by a third. Its concrete is then cured using CO ₂ gas, locking the pollutant in the rock, creating carbon reductions of 70 percent.	U.K.-based Zelp has invented a halter that rests loosely over a cow's nostrils, monitors methane exhaust, and zaps it with a catalyst, creating water and less-harmful CO ₂ . The device can lower bovine emissions by half.	Floating solar installations on hydroelectric dams exploit unused aquatic surface adjacent to hydropower that can create energy in the dark. A new floating solar plant in South Korea will be the world's largest, at 41 MW.	E-planes are moving closer to takeoff. Last June, a modified Cessna with room for nine flew for nearly 30 minutes over Washington state. In October, a hybrid electric plane cruised for two hours and 30 minutes over California.	Tropical Medellín, Colombia, has planted more than 350,000 trees and shrubs since 2016 to create 30 shaded "green corridors" that have reduced urban temperatures by more than three degrees.	A partnership of Scandinavian nations is building a large ferry powered by hydrogen fuel cells, which create energy from hydrogen gas and release only water. The hydrogen itself will be green, sourced from splitting water molecules with wind energy.
The Potential	Deployed in the Bay of Fundy in Nova Scotia, famous for its high tides, the initial project will power 3,000 homes. If tidal energy emerges as a reliable, scalable technology, it could provide more than five percent of global energy needs.	If it were a country, cement would rank third in emissions — eight percent of global CO ₂ . If adopted across the industry, Solidia says, its technology could lower annual CO ₂ pollution by 1.5 gigatons, and save 3 trillion liters of water.	In the U.S. alone, there are more than 90 million head of cattle. Wearable technology can help ranchers track and claim their reduced emissions, while also giving them valuable data on the health of their herds.	The Korean plant will provide power for 60,000 people, but with more than 150,000 square miles of man-made reservoirs globally, floating solar has a "potential on a terawatt scale," according to the World Bank.	Half of all flights are less than 500 miles, creating a sweet spot for e-planes. U.K. budget airliner EasyJet plans to commercialize e-plane travel on routes like London-to-Amsterdam by 2030.	With similar strategies underway from Mexico City to Paris, greening cities is one of the cheapest climate-mitigation strategies, and the foliage offers ancillary benefits, from reducing air pollution to creating wildlife habitats.	The ferry will connect Oslo and Copenhagen by 2027 and avoid 64,000 tons of CO ₂ annually. The U.S. Department of Energy underscores vast potential for hydrogen on the high seas, calling it suitable to power "most vessels in the world's fleet."

WILL DEMOCRATS GET IT RIGHT THIS TIME?

If Congress has any hope of addressing the climate crisis, it'll have to learn from its abysmal failure in 2010

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BY **PATRICK REIS**

ILLUSTRATION BY **DANIEL STOLLE**

BARBARA BOXER WAS IN Greenland in July 2007, watching chunks of ice slide off glaciers into the rising ocean. She had brought Republican senators there with her, hoping a first-person confrontation with climate change would persuade them to take action. And as the newly calved icebergs flowed past, the then-senator thought her colleagues might be persuaded to vote yes on legislation to transform the U.S. from one of the world's biggest greenhouse-gas polluters into a leader in addressing the crisis. "This was a moment in time," Boxer tells *ROLLING STONE*, "where I thought, 'We're going to do it. It's going to work.'"

She was wrong. She'd find out for sure on July 22nd, 2010, when Senate Majority Leader Harry

Reid gathered his top lieutenants for a private meeting. Democrats had 59 Senate seats and had already passed a major climate bill through the House. But Reid had tough news: He'd conferred with the White House, and they'd decided they were moving on from climate. Environmental groups and climate-friendly Democrats protested, but the truth was that Reid wasn't killing the Senate bill so much as euthanizing it: After a promising beginning, the climate push had been falling apart for months, and even the bill's supporters weren't calling for a vote because they knew they didn't have the all-important 60 votes to pass it.

A decade later, many of the people who worked on the bill remain haunted by its failure. "If [the climate bill] had become law, we would now be talking about the final phases of what we have to do before 2030 to complete our journey toward net-zero greenhouse-gas emissions," says Sen. Ed Markey, who was in the House in 2009 and co-authored its Waxman-Markey climate bill. "We would have created millions of new jobs. The solar and wind and all-electric-vehicle revolution would have already taken hold."

Instead, the past decade has seen dystopian climate fiction become reality: California families driving through blackened skies as they flee a burning paradise; "once in a thousand years" floods becoming near-annual events in

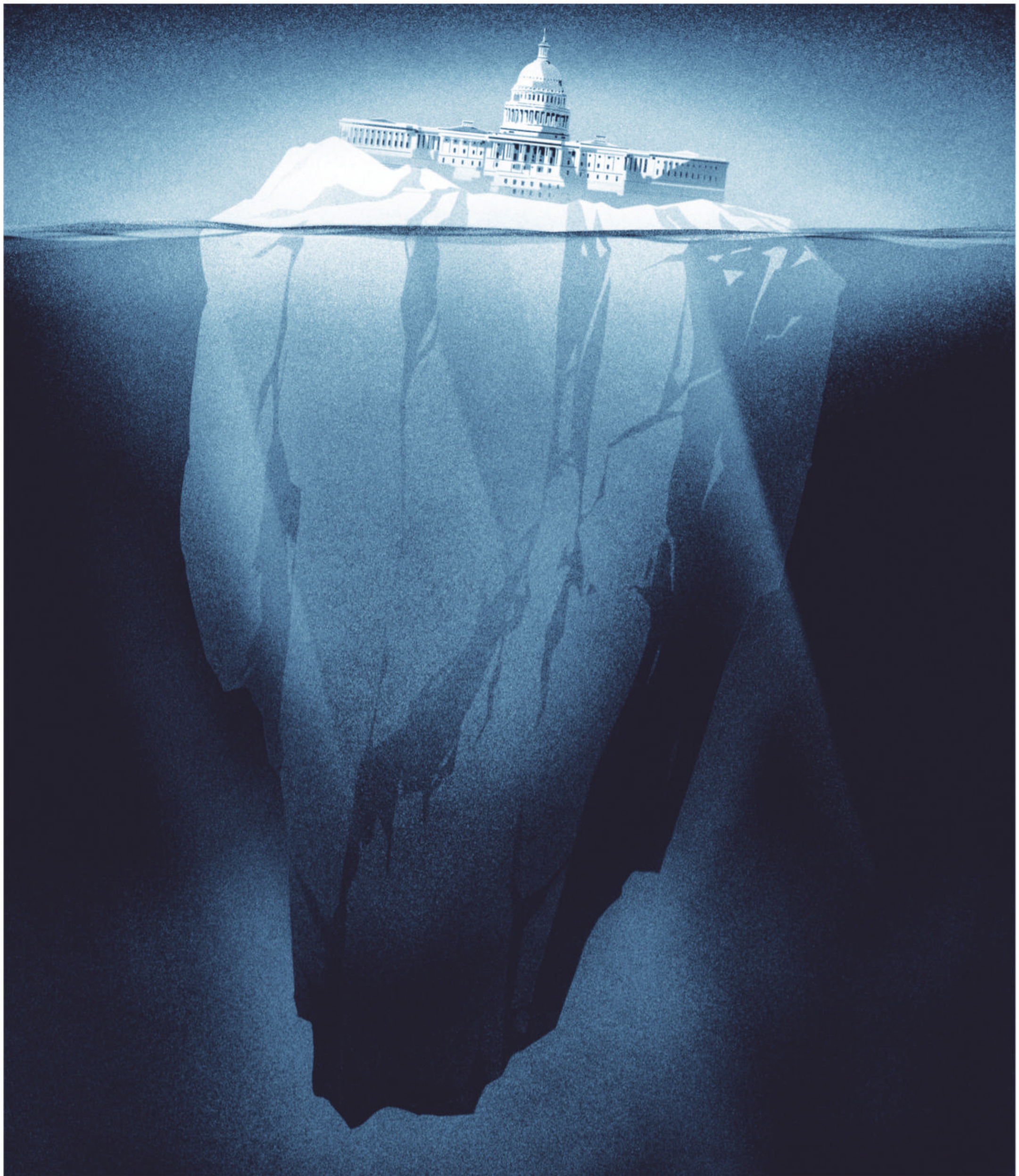
the Midwest; superstorms pounding the coast with alarming frequency. And while temperatures keep climbing, the United States keeps pumping climate-cooking greenhouse gases into the atmosphere.

After the bill collapsed, the coalition that had backed it became a circular firing squad, as congressional, White House, industry, and environmental partners blamed one another – most notably in a 2010 *New Yorker* story in which Senate staffers ripped Obama for not doing more. But beyond arguing that someone else was to blame, the dissecting produced little in the way of consensus as to how a popular president, bolstered by big majorities in Congress, failed to deliver on a major campaign promise. The question is newly relevant, with Democrats back in control of government for the first time in a decade and again hoping to address climate change – though this time with a far smaller margin for error.

Hoping to understand what went wrong and how this crop of Democrats could get it right, *ROLLING STONE* interviewed more than two dozen current and former administration officials, lawmakers, staffers, and environmental leaders who were at the heart of Obama's climate push. With a decade's worth of distance from the failure, conversations with the officials reveal a different and more holistic picture of what went wrong in 2009-10.

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There were outside hurdles (the Great Recession, Obamacare, the BP oil spill), and there were certainly bad actors (*ahem*, Sen. Lindsey Graham) and officials who failed to rise to the moment (Obama staffers Rahm Emanuel and David Axelrod were, per multiple sources, indifferent at best to the climate push). But those were all deck chairs on the *Titanic*: The effort was ultimately doomed by a major misreading of the changing politics of the moment, and particularly by an outdated assessment of who really held the power in the Republican Party.

Democrats spent most of their energy courting corporate CEOs, believing that if they signed on, Republicans would be sure to follow. But the GOP was rapidly mutating into a toxic golem of Tea Party extremism, Mitch McConnell-style cynicism, and megadonor money. “The ground shifted underneath, and it was no longer the case by the spring of 2010 that simply having leading business voices supporting a bill was enough to get Republicans on board,” says the Environmental Defense Fund’s Nathaniel Keohane. And amid the focus on corporate boardrooms and industry concessions, the climate effort’s architects neglected to build the grassroots support they’d desperately need when the Tea Party attacks began.

In criticizing the Obama-era effort, Markey adds the caveat that a lot of what’s obvious now wasn’t then. “You live life forwards, but you understand it backwards,” he says. Sometimes, however, you get a second chance. Democrats are now making even bigger promises on climate, but the same forces that strangled the last climate push are coming for this one, including a Republican Party that has only gotten more extreme. And with zero margin for error in Congress, Democrats need to learn from their past mistakes if they’re going to avoid a failure the planet cannot afford. “The one thing that’s clear,” says David Doniger of the Natural Resources Defense Council, “is how we’re just desperately running out of time – how deep into overtime we are.”

N EWT GINGRICH SAT on a love seat with Nancy Pelosi in the spring of 2008. Filming a commercial for Al Gore’s climate campaign, the duo looked into each other’s eyes and agreed on the urgent need for action on climate change. It’s unthinkable today – and indeed by the time he was running for president in 2011, Gingrich was claiming, implausibly, that his real purpose was to make a point that “we shouldn’t be afraid to debate the left, even on the environment.”

But his canoodling with Pelosi is a reminder that in the run-up to Obama’s election, there were some saner climate voices on the rise in the Republican Party. There was still a formidable wacko wing – Oklahoma Sen. Jim Inhofe

was claiming climate change was a new-world-order hoax – but seven Republican senators voted for a plan to cap greenhouse-gas emissions that summer, and John McCain won the GOP primary while laying out a climate-change platform that looked similar to the one touted by Obama.

The business world was experiencing a similar shift. There were companies fighting any and all attempts to unfuck the planet, but some corporate CEOs had – with varying degrees of sincerity – come to the table. That sentiment produced the U.S. Climate Action Partnership (CAP), a coalition of industry and environmental groups that aimed to build a climate plan everyone could live with. They settled on a system called “cap and trade,” which would require polluters to obtain permits for their greenhouse-gas emissions and then “cap” the total number of permits available in order to reduce emissions overall. Polluters would also be allowed to sell unused permits (that’s where the “trade” comes in) to emitters that hadn’t found a way to reduce their own pollution, effectively creating a carbon market. Some environmental groups harbored doubts about cap and trade, but it was a political winner: The Obama and

Greenpeace withdrew its support in May, saying the bill did too little to cut emissions and gave too much in subsidies for “clean coal” power plants – but most green groups lived with the changes in the hopes of winning over a large block of centrist Blue Dog Democrats.

The eve of the climate vote in the House coincided with the annual Congressional picnic. While lawmakers gathered on the White House lawn, Obama met with swing voters on the climate bill in the Oval Office, asking them what it would take to get to “yes.” It was the type of schmoozing Obama loathed, and a senior White House official says some of the meetings drifted into the absurd: Brought to the Oval Office to discuss a bill aimed at addressing a global crisis, one lawmaker spent the bulk of his time trying to get Obama to autograph various items (the representative got the autographs but voted no on the bill anyway, the official says).

In the end, the bill squeaked by, 219 to 212. Despite the business-friendly framework and the perks added for fossil fuels, Republicans voted against it 168 to 8, and 44 Democrats jumped ship as well. It should have been a red flag that perhaps the corporate-led strategy was missing its mark, but still, it was a victory, and when Democrats left for their August recess, the climate plan was still on schedule.

Then all hell broke loose. Democrats found themselves under siege at town halls from a rising Tea Party movement that raged about Obamacare and, to a lesser extent, cap and trade – calling it a “cap and tax” government takeover of the energy sector that would leave American families paying sky-high electric bills for power that only worked when the wind blew and the sun shined.

Those were nonsense arguments about a market-based bill that aimed to gradually phase out fossil fuels (too gradually, according to many climate scientists) and subsidize renewable energy, but Democrats failed to effectively counter the Tea Party messaging, says Tom Perriello, a Virginia Democrat who lost his House seat in 2010 after voting yes on cap and trade. “We didn’t tell an integrated story that connected the stimulus, the health care bill, and climate change as being about rebuilding the American dream, making the American dream real and affordable again,” Perriello says. “It seemed like just three large gigantic votes, all with big price tags, all of which the Republicans were able to suggest were going to cost people at the kitchen table.”

Meanwhile, fossil-fuel backers like the Koch brothers were feeding Tea Partiers their climate-change talking points and pouring money into an anti-cap-and-trade campaign. Exactly where that cash was coming from was difficult to track, and today, people involved in the effort suspect that some companies were

“The Obama administration desperately wanted bipartisan support for everything,” says Markey. “But that’s like waiting for Godot. It never shows up.”

McCain campaigns both endorsed it, each touting it as a pragmatic, market-based solution.

After Obama trounced McCain and Democrats won huge majorities in Congress, U.S. CAP members planned to take their big ideas to Capitol Hill. The thinking was that if everyone from the CEO of BP to the head of the Natural Resources Defense Council could agree on cap and trade, Congress couldn’t possibly say no.

That theory was to be first tested in the House, where Markey and Rep. Henry Waxman introduced a cap-and-trade bill in the spring of 2009, a measure that also included a renewable-energy standard and billions in subsidies for creating “green jobs.” The White House hoped the measure would pass in a landslide. Cabinet secretaries were given lists of wavering House members to persuade, and Waxman and Markey spent months working with moderate Democrats to make the bill more amenable to the coal industry and agriculture. Environmental groups weren’t wild about the concessions –



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participating in cap-and-trade bill negotiations while also funding efforts to sink it.

“This was when that political game was changing,” says Perriello. In an earlier era, lawmakers could survive by bringing stakeholders in their districts together and cutting a deal that everyone could live with. But dark money changed that calculus. “Rather than say, ‘You know what, this isn’t everything that we like, but this is a fair way to go forward,’ these [industry] groups got everything they wanted from the bill – a much-watered-down thing that upset the environmentalists for good reason – and then they still went out and spent unlimited amounts of money [to attack it], because they could do it initially through dark money while looking like they were playing ball.”

Another flaw in the pro-corporate strategy was that it turned off some would-be grassroots supporters. Rhetoric about “carbon markets” and “emissions trading” went over poorly with large parts of the Democratic base who’d found themselves on the wrong end of the “free market” for generations. And so legions of cap-and-trade critics overwhelmed supporters at town halls. When Perriello tried to explain his climate vote at one August town hall, he was unable to be heard over the chants of “drill, drill, drill.”

For the next six months, as the Tea Party raged, the two parties were locked in a death struggle over health care, causing a delay that was a disaster for the climate. “The chance of passing both health care and climate change really was contingent on getting health care done in the fall of 2009,” says Phil Schiliro, Obama’s director of legislative affairs.

With Friends Like These Graham, Lieberman, and Kerry (from left) led the “tripartisan” effort to find votes in the Senate, but it fell apart after Graham bailed.

Despite all that, in the spring of 2010, it looked like the Senate might pass a climate bill of its own. The most promising effort came from “the three amigos” – Democrat John Kerry, Independent Joe Lieberman, and Republican Lindsey Graham, a “tripartisan” trio who vowed to bring left, right, and center together on a climate bill. Graham wasn’t the climate movement’s first choice for a GOP partner. That probably would have been McCain. But the wounds from his 2008 campaign were too fresh. McCain “completely ices us out,” says Carol Browner, Obama’s climate and energy czar. “I have these very painful meetings with McCain about climate change, and he’s just so angry about what happened in the election.”

McCain was frustrated that environmentalists had attacked his record during his contest with Obama, after he’d been a leading Republican on climate change for years. Then, that spring, any chance of him joining the climate effort vanished when he was faced with a Tea Party primary challenger. So instead of McCain, the climate team got his understudy. “Graham called me literally out of the blue,” says Browner. “I answer my phone one day, and it’s Lindsey Graham: ‘I’m going to be your best friend, Carol, because I’m *there* on climate change.’”

After months of planning, negotiations, and delays, they finally set a date for the congres-

sional equivalent of an album-release party: April 26th. The plan was for the trio to stand united on Capitol Hill and unveil their own version of a cap-and-trade bill that could get the 60 votes needed to overcome an inevitable Mitch McConnell-backed filibuster.

Except it never happened. Within two days, it all fell apart. The high-water mark of the entire congressional effort might have been April 23rd, when Kerry triumphantly announced corporate support for the bill: Three major oil companies and the nation’s leading utility lobby group were on board, and the American Petroleum Institute had generously agreed to hold off on running attack ads. Kerry had to agree to a host of pro-industry provisions – including a delay for when the emissions caps would take effect – but he finally had the corporate support Democrats were counting on for GOP votes.

Graham abandoned the climate effort the next day. His official reason was that Reid had killed the bill’s chances by promising to take up immigration reform – and he was still furious that a White House source had anonymously (and largely falsely) told Fox News that Graham was trying to get a gas tax included in the bill. But others, then and now, doubted those excuses. “We gained momentum until a major coal enterprise unleashed a major assault on Lindsey Graham in his home state,” Kerry tells *ROLLING STONE*. “That’s when things got harder.” (Graham’s office did not respond to a request for comment.)

Kerry and Lieberman continued scrambling to find the bill its 60 votes. They released a measure in May, but no Republicans signed on. Graham didn’t even support it, saying that it put too many restrictions on offshore drilling – at a moment when the Deepwater Horizon spill was gushing 200 million-plus gallons of oil into the Gulf of Mexico.

Environmental groups “kept leaking word to the press that the numbers for this bill were going up when the numbers were going down,” says Jim Manley, Reid’s communications director at the time. “Privately, members were raising doubts to Reid.” By late July, Reid told lawmakers he was moving on. The bill would never get a vote. “There was official public happy talk that day” about coming back to climate soon, says Darren Goode, the longtime congressional reporter who broke the news of Reid’s climate decision. “But pretty much everyone knew that that had been [Democrats’] only real chance.”

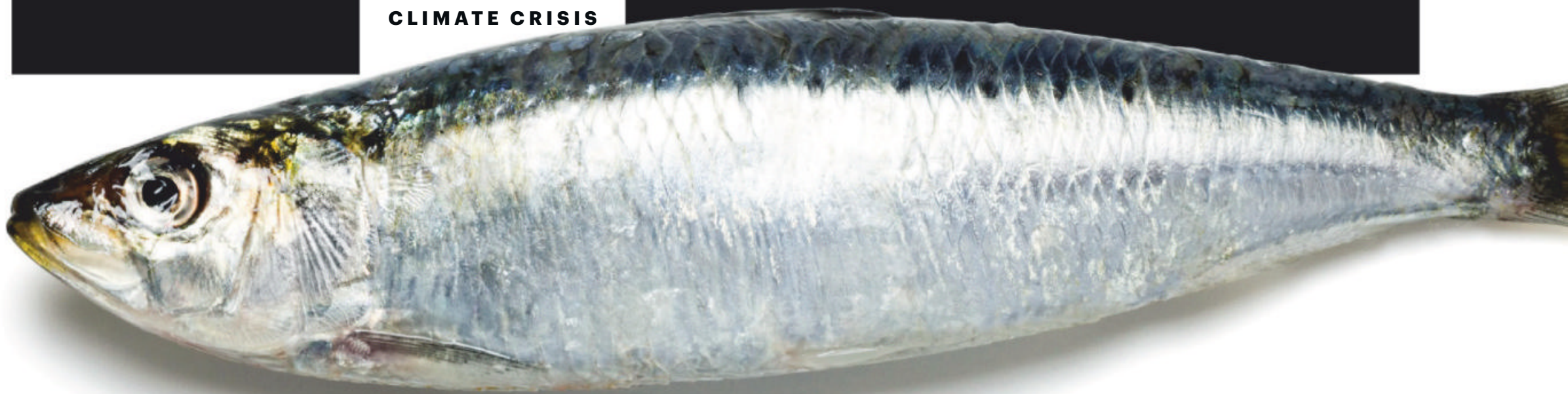
IS THERE ANY hope now? Can Joe Biden’s Democrats do with 50 Senate votes – one of which belongs to West Virginia’s Joe Manchin, who once ran an ad of himself shooting a bullet through the cap-and-trade bill – what they couldn’t when they had far larger majorities under Obama? [Cont. on 79]

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HOW THE CLIMATE CRISIS WILL CHANGE WHAT WE EAT

SARDINES

Small open-water fish like sardines, herring, and anchovies are among the most “climate friendly” fish to catch, requiring by far the least amount of boat fuel to gather. But rising ocean temperatures are deadly to sardine larvae, and the species depends on plankton for food, which is becoming scarcer in some parts of the world due to increasingly variable wind patterns. An 87 percent collapse of sardine fisheries in the Southern Caribbean over the course of a decade was attributed largely to climate change, with overfishing contributing as well. At the same time, research suggests sardine populations in the Pacific Ocean will travel north to cooler waters over the next 60 years, reducing stock in current California fishing ports by 20 to 50 percent.

WHEAT

Accounting for 20 percent of all calories consumed by people — and 100 percent of all comfort food — wheat is threatened by drought and rising carbon-dioxide levels. Researchers project that even if we stop global temperatures from rising 2 C, the wheat-growing areas affected by drought will double in the next 20 to 50 years. Rising CO₂ levels may offset some of that by fueling photosynthesis and increasing yield, but a recent study suggested rising CO₂ will also strip significant amounts of nutrients from wheat and other plants like barley, potatoes, and rice.



Cranberries

Indigenous peoples in the Northeast have used this winter-hardy crop in their foods and medicines for thousands of years. In Massachusetts, which produces about a quarter of the country's cranberry crop, the industry is now worth \$1 billion and employs 7,000 farmers. The plants, many of which are more than 100 years old, grow in ancient bogs that fall prey to erratic rainfall and drought. And in heat waves, cranberries can suffer from a condition called “scald,” where the fruit cooks on the vine because it can't cool itself.

// BY HANNAH MURPHY AND ANDREA MARKS

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ROM THE Georgia peach to Colombian coffee, the food we eat is an entrenched part of American culture. But thanks to rising temperatures and CO₂ levels, climate change is expected to transform the future of food.

Extreme weather and pests are already wiping out crops while acidifying oceans are disrupting fisheries. The key is learning how to adapt. “It's a race between innovation and the impacts of climate,” says Keith Wiebe of the International Food Policy Research Institute. It will require breeding new strains of staple foods and moving farmland north into cooler climes. “Napa Valley pretty much ends up in Canada not too long from now,” says Lisa Goddard, a climate scientist at Columbia University.

And the outcome is far from certain as the weather becomes more unpredictable. “The entire history of agriculture is based on experience with relatively stable temperatures,” Wiebe says. “And we're going to move beyond that in the next decades.”





ALMONDS

California grows about 80 percent of the world’s almonds. “That crop takes a ridiculously lot of water to grow,” says Goddard, director of Columbia University’s International Research Institute for Climate and Society. “As California’s facing water shortages, this is going to be a problem.” In addition to rainfall, California farmers rely on snowmelt from the Sierra Nevada mountains flowing into the state’s irrigation canals. As less snow accumulates and melts earlier because of climate change, thirsty crops like almonds are likely to be especially affected by the late-season water shortage. Researchers are studying whether the almond industry could eventually shift north into Oregon and Washington, which by 2050 may be warm enough to support the crop.



Coffee

Higher temperatures, more intense rain, and persistent humidity have made coffee plantations hospitable hosts for the “coffee leaf rust” fungus. From 2012 to 2017, coffee rust forced almost 2 million farmers off their land. One study estimates that because of global warming, we could lose 50 percent of the land suitable to grow coffee by 2050.



Chickpeas

Chickpeas are a key source of protein for some 20 percent of the world, but due to many centuries of domestication, they are vulnerable to drought and disease. Researchers have collected seeds and DNA from the legume’s heartier, wild counterparts, hoping to breed a plant that can better weather the coming changes.



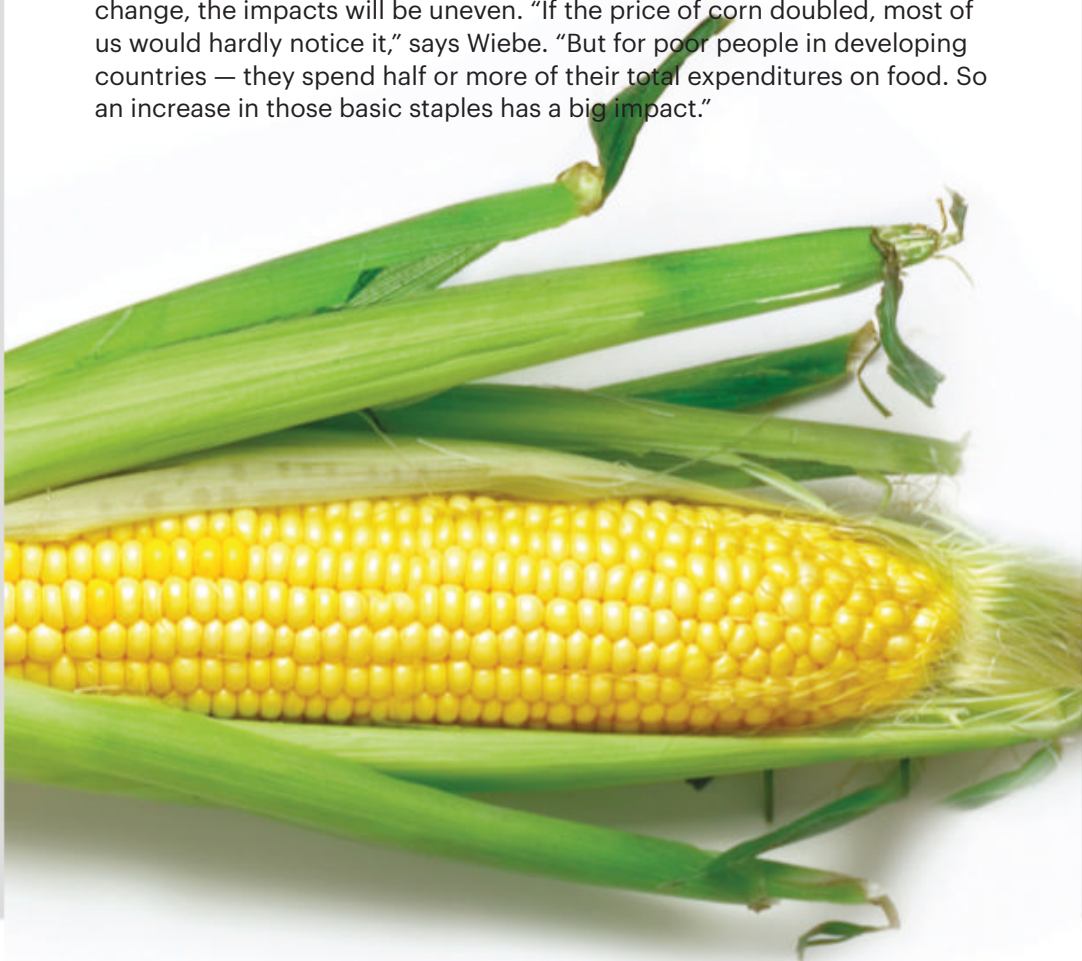
SCALLOPS

Baby shellfish like oysters and scallops start building their shells when they’re somewhere between the size of a speck of dust and a lentil, filtering calcium and carbonate from ocean waters to construct their protective layers. But as the oceans’ acidity increases due to the rising CO2 levels, the number of carbonate ions in the water declines. Unable to build their shells, the shellfish die or grow more slowly, making them more vulnerable to predators. One report estimated that with scallops, ocean acidification could reduce the population by as much as 50 percent in just a few decades.



CORN

Corn is the most vital crop in sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America, and it’s the largest grown in the United States. But healthy crops can be taken out in one fell swoop by an ill-timed drought. And like most of the damage wrought by climate change, the impacts will be uneven. “If the price of corn doubled, most of us would hardly notice it,” says Wiebe. “But for poor people in developing countries — they spend half or more of their total expenditures on food. So an increase in those basic staples has a big impact.”



PEACHES

In winter, when hardy fruit trees like peaches and cherries are dormant, they need to experience a certain number of “chilling hours” — where temperatures remain between freezing and 45 degrees — for the fruit to reliably form. A study found that between 1950 and 2000, yearly chilling hours decreased by as much as 30 percent in some parts of California. But there is hope: In 2020, the USDA released three new peach varieties bred to survive shorter, warmer winters.



Wine

Wine grapes require hyperspecific climates to produce wines with sugar, acid, and tannins balanced exactly right. Drought, floods, hail, fires, and unpredictable rains and freezes threaten to decimate yields. In 2020, smoke damage from the worst wildfire season in modern California history ruined 13 percent of the state’s wine-grape crop. A recent study predicted that if global temperatures rise by 2 C, suitable wine-grape regions could shrink by as much as 56 percent by the end of the century.



Rice

Rice production is fundamental to global food security: It’s a staple for more than half the world’s population. Researchers are isolating breeds that are drought- and flood-tolerant. But the biggest enemy may be rising sea levels. In Bangladesh, coastal flooding is literally salting the earth, making it impossible to cultivate the rice fields. According to one study, 200,000 coastal farmers will likely be forced out by rising tides in the next 120 years.



Activist William Morris in California in February

A MATTER OF FAITH

Young evangelicals are waking up to the threat of climate change — and working to bring their church along with them

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BY **ALEX MORRIS**

PHOTOGRAPH BY
ROZETTE RAGO

A FEW YEARS BACK, William Morris came to realize just how he could be a light unto the world. Before this precise moment in time, his visions of a missionary life had involved foreign climes, distant shores, desecrated wastelands in desperate need of redemption. Then he had looked around at his native L.A. At the church he'd grown up attending. At the faith community he'd always considered to be his home.

When it came to the climate crisis, he realized, his own flock were still living in darkness. Perhaps, with God's grace, he could help bring them to the light.

Growing up in a conservative evangelical Baptist church, Morris, 25, had been the beneficiary of proper conservative evangelical indoctrination: "You know, evolution is a made-up political thing, and climate isn't really changing," he says. "LGBTQ people are sinful. All these different checking off of all those boxes, basically." Yet he'd gravitated toward science,

especially once he got to middle school and the labs and experiments had proven to him that rather than being "trickery," what he was learning was undeniably true. Such a realization didn't cause a crisis of faith per se, but it did lead to a mental bifurcation, a sense that God and science could coexist, but in two separate realms, largely divorced from each other.

In college, where he majored in environmental science, Morris found that he was often in a group of one — the only science major in class who openly identified as Christian and the only

person in church who was a science major. Then one day, sitting in on a congregational meeting on mission work, he heard one of the speakers talking about environmental missions. “I was like, ‘What the heck is that?’” Morris tells me. “It was the first time I heard someone who was Christian explicitly doing environmental stuff. I went up to him right after and was like, ‘Hey, we need to talk.’”

That conversation eventually led Morris to spend a month doing volunteer work with a Christian conservation organization in Kenya, cataloging rare bird species, mapping mangrove forests, and collecting data on coral reefs. His meals and his free time were shared with other Christian environmentalists and scientists, most of whom were Kenyan and notably did not share his evangelical American hang-ups. He marveled at how their faith was not only integrated into their environmental pursuits but was in fact integral to them.

“That’s where I really felt a sense of purpose for the first time,” he says. “That dichotomy finally went away of science versus faith. It was just a huge sigh of relief feeling almost, like, vindicated. I was like, ‘See, I knew it. I’m not crazy. I’m not the only one who cares about all of these things.’ It was this very holistic view that I never had gotten anywhere else. And I had to go all the way to Kenya to get it.”

Morris also began to see this holistic view all over scripture: in Genesis, where the mandate to have dominion over creation did not seem to imply callous exploitation but rather a call to wise stewardship, and throughout the Gospels, where Jesus didn’t assuage people’s suffering with promises of the afterlife but actually tended to their physical needs in the here and now. So, Morris pondered, wouldn’t loving one’s neighbor mean protecting their habitat? Making sure they could grow food, have clean air and water, not be subjected to forced migration or the “threat multiplier” that he knew climate change to be?

In integrating his faith with his environmentalism, Morris came to have a new understanding of what that faith entailed, one that he actually felt was deeper and more authentic. Before the world could be healed by the church, he reasoned, maybe the church needed healing through its engagement with the world. He would go home and preach the message of environmentalism.

IN AMERICA, WHITE, evangelical Protestants remain uniquely skeptical of climate change. According to a 2019 study by the Public Religion Research Institute, only 33 percent of that faith group believe that climate change is the result of human activity, and 37 percent do not believe that climate change is happening at all. But as undeniable

evidence has piled up to the contrary, expecting evangelical youth to ignore or deny this existential threat to their futures has, for some, proved a bridge too far. It’s one thing to be instructed to consider natural selection a “theory,” it’s another entirely to be asked to ignore your species’ own destruction of itself.

The schism between the conservative Christian church and the hard facts of science probably dates back to our colonial origins, to the Puritan ideological divide between what is spiritual and what is physical, between what is holy and what is of this Earth. But its modern incarnation can be traced directly to the Scopes “monkey trial” of 1925, in which three-time presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan won a conviction against John Scopes for teaching evolution at a Tennessee public school. The case got national attention, and its verdict provoked backlash, bringing ridicule to the faction of American Protestantism that had previously seen itself as the unquestioned moral bedrock of the nation, and providing the seeds of what would grow into the culture wars.

It wasn’t always clear, however, that environmentalism would become a culture-war issue. In 1967, an essay by Lynn White Jr. titled

“This is my sacrament,” says one organizer. “The environment is one of the most powerful tools, if not the most powerful tool of connecting with the creator.”

“The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis” swept a small but notable contingent of evangelicals into the environmental cause. By the mid-1990s, the Evangelical Environmental Network was fighting back against the Republican gutting of the Endangered Species Act, which some Christians viewed as essential to preserving wildlife that had been saved in Noah’s ark. By the early 2000s, the EEN was growing concerned about the climate – so concerned that in 2006 it developed a campaign called the Evangelical Climate Initiative, tasked with persuading evangelical leaders to sign a declaration that it was imperative to halt climate change. Many did, including famous pastors like Rick Warren and Joel Hunter. “And so what happened, basically, was the Evangelical Climate Initiative was so successful that it kind of freaked people out,” says Robin Globus Veldman, a professor of religious studies at Texas A&M and author of *The Gospel of Climate Skepticism: Why Evangelical Christians Oppose Action on Climate*

Change. “Evangelical elites who were politically active came under pressure from their Republican colleagues because if too many evangelicals became convinced that they needed to vote on the issue of climate change, then that reduces their ability to get out the vote on the Republican side by focusing on abortion, religious liberty, and sexual morality.”

Naturally, the culture wars came to the rescue, helping to cast environmentalism as unabashed secularism. “It was like, ‘Oh, environmentalists are just saying this in order to attack Christianity. Just like evolutionists are trying to deny origins, now environmentalists are trying to deny that God is in control,’” Veldman says. That schism between faith and science was a comfortable, well-worn path, and once a theological element was introduced into climate skepticism, the framework was set for disinformation to do the rest. “You had the same pages out of the playbook and the same tactics and the same funding of the broader climate-denial machine – and sometimes even the same umbrella organizations that were doing the bidding of ExxonMobil – get involved in this,” says Katharine Wilkinson, author of *Between God & Green*. “It was like, ‘Ostensibly we’re debating about science, ostensibly we’re debating about theology,’ but actually that’s not at all what was happening. It just injected toxicity into the space.”

From the inside, the issue is still often spun as theological. But as awareness of the climate crisis has grown, young evangelicals who grew up singing, “He’s got the whole world in his hands,” have started to question whether God’s sovereignty absolves them of responsibility. They are also wrestling with the morality of ignoring a problem that is clearly tied to the greed and the suffering of others. “I think that there’s so much that the church in America can learn from Christians in other countries who are having the experience of dealing with climate change on the front lines,” says Cameron Kritikos, 26, a student at Yale Divinity school who also works with the Climate Witness Project within the Office of Social Justice of the Christian Reformed Church, an office that he says is not universally supported by the denomination. “There is a decent chunk of folks who say that, you know, science is funded by George Soros, who send us prayers saying, ‘Thank God for fossil fuels,’” he says. “But Christians in other countries are living the experience of displacement and not being able to grow their crops. I often hear from others who are doing development work, ‘Y’all in the U.S. are the only Christians who are having conversations about whether climate change exists.’”

Such conversations are no doubt part of the reason that as many as two-thirds of young American Protestants who attended church

regularly in high school stop attending in college, creating a category known as “exvangelicals.” Others are trying to change the evangelical narrative from within and finding fellowship in an organization called Young Evangelicals for Climate Action (YECA) – the only one thus far to thread that particular needle – which, since its founding in 2012, has seen its numbers swell as climate projections have gotten increasingly dire. In 2014, when the organization launched its Fellows Program on college campuses, there were only four fellows in three states; now there are 28 fellows on 18 campuses in 12 states. Thousands have signed the YECA call-to-action pledge, and more than 25,000 young people have performed at least one of its “actions,” from starting an environmentalism club at their school to launching a recycling campaign at their church to advocating for legislation with their elected officials. The organization now has a footprint in almost every state, but what’s changed in addition to its reach is the attitudes it encounters.

“Nine years ago when YECA began, our conversations on Christian college campuses had to start all the way back at why working on this didn’t mean we were atheists or communists, why it was OK for Christians to ask the kinds of questions we were asking, why climate change didn’t need to be immediately dismissed as a liberal lie,” says Kyle Meyaard-Schaap, who was YECA’s national organizer until taking a position with EEN, its parent organization, earlier this year. “That’s where we started our conversations. The challenge was giving young Christians a permission to engage in this at all and to question the assumptions they had been handed that this wasn’t a problem to be concerned about. And now when we go to college campuses, we don’t have to make the case for why climate change is a problem or that it’s happening or what our faith calls us to in response to that. Young Christians get all of that. What they want to be told is that they have the agency to do something about it.”

And while working to do something about it, young evangelicals are not surprised to confront confusion on all sides. “People are like, ‘Wait, *young* evangelicals? Those exist, first of all?’” says Jenna Van Donselaar, 25, a field organizer for YECA, with a laugh. “‘Climate action? And then all together? *Whaaaaat?*’” While text banking on YECA’s behalf before the 2020 election, she was more bemused than disturbed by the amount of ire that came her way – and her inability to pinpoint from which side it might come. “Half the responses were ‘F you.’ I’m like, ‘Do you hate that I’m an evangelical? Do you hate that I’m [fighting] climate change? Do you hate that I’m just texting you in general?’”

What all of the young evangelicals I spoke with agreed on was that, despite some initial



Creation Care Top: YECA fellow Elsa Barron planting a mango tree in Uganda, 2020. Above: YECA activists at the People’s Climate March in 2017.

head-scratching, secular environmental groups were thrilled to see them emerge, recognizing their potential to infiltrate a group that was mostly impervious to outsiders and that wielded a dramatically disproportionate share of political power. White evangelical Protestants may make up only 17 percent of the population, according to a 2017 study by the Public Religion Research Institute, but the GOP is 35 percent evangelical (and 73 percent white Christian). “Usually [environmental groups] will meet me and be excited,” Van Donselaar says. “Like, ‘Oh, we can use you. You can speak the language of people who we haven’t really been able to reach.’”

Certainly, this helps. When it comes to church outreach, YECA members will often try to befriend younger people – who need far less convincing that environmentalism is a matter of both urgency and faith – and then move up the chain of command to older, more resistant church leadership to advocate for a sermon series, a bible study, an institutional acknowledgment of what they carefully refer to not as “climate action” but as “creation care.” They use scripture, not data or science (which they say can be “triggering”), to make their points. They refer to “stewardship” and “discipleship” and “redemption” of the natural world. They talk about their fears of having children, of the impossibility of living out the command to “be fruitful and multiply” in a world threatened by climate change. Sometimes they get through. Sometimes they don’t. Sometimes there is considerable pushback, the charge that they’ve been brainwashed by liberals or are engaging in false teaching or are clearly choosing the wrong issue on which to devote their time.

“I hear that one all the time,” says Van Donselaar. “I mean, the Republican Party did a really good job branding themselves as the party that doesn’t kill babies. And that’s very powerful rhetoric. So in conversations, we often talk about, ‘OK, what does it mean to be actually pro-life? What does it mean to look for policies that don’t want to harm mothers, that don’t want to harm immigrants, that don’t want to support the death penalty? What does it look like to actually support mothers who have children? What does it mean to be more holistically “pro-life”?’ When I reach out to strangers and they say, ‘But what about unborn babies?’ I say, ‘Well, what about alive people in Bangladesh?’”

The most hurtful pushback, however, can be the kind that impugns their motivations, that views their climate action as a lack of faith in God’s sovereignty and control over creation. To young climate activists, this doesn’t seem reasonable – God gives us brains to understand information and free will to act on it – but they know it runs so deep in their faith community as to almost be taken for granted. So deep as to absolve inaction. So deep as to make action look, to some, like heresy.

And this is particularly hard to take, they say, because climate action is something they do not in spite of their faith, but as a practice of it. “We drove from Michigan to D.C. as an act of faith,” says Kritikos of the car pool he and other Christian activists shared to join the sit-in in Nancy Pelosi’s office in support of the Green New Deal. The night before, his nonviolent-protest training had taken place in a church. “They prepared us for the process of being arrested and said, ‘If you’re a religious person, we invite you to use this time while you’re in jail to think about this movement and how it is a part of a



growing movement worldwide.” Which is exactly what Kritikos did when he was arrested the following day – and continues to do. “I pray for repentance for the way that myself and others have contributed to the harm of creation. I pray for folks to take their most fundamental beliefs – that God loves them and loves the world – to go and act boldly.”

“This is my sacrament,” says Sarah Herring, 23, another YECA field organizer. “The environment is one of the most powerful tools, if not *the* most powerful tool of connecting with the creator. That’s why I’m so passionate about my activism.” Says Meyaard-Schaap, “We’re doing this not because we’re environmentalists, not because we’re Democrats or Republicans. We’re doing this because we’re Christians, because we’re trying to follow Jesus and we think this is part of what that means.”

FINDING THAT CONNECTION between faith and climate activism can be a painful process. The climate crisis is a source of deep anxiety for most anyone who has a passing understanding of its potential impact, but for many young evangelical activists, it also means confronting the fact that they were misinformed by people and institutions they loved and trusted. “I was sort of known as the Creation Girl,” says Elsa Barron, 21, a YECA fellow and senior at University of Notre Dame. “I was outspoken about it. I was like, ‘Oh, what I’m learning in school is dangerous, and I have to combat it.’” She begged her parents to drive her to conferences on creationism, where she stocked up on books on the topic. She started intensely studying biology as a way to prove that evolution wasn’t true.

Pro-Life Agenda “When I reach out to strangers and they say, ‘What about unborn babies?’ I say, ‘What about alive people in Bangladesh?’” says Jenna Van Donselaar.

“I was trained to defend the literal nature of the Bible and very much taught that if one of the dominoes falls, the whole thing is going to fall.”

Then, during her freshman year of college, she did an experiment analyzing the genetic similarity of cellular proteins, which illustrated to her, beyond a shadow of a doubt, how those proteins were evolutionarily related. “That was a really big moment for me of being like, ‘This is clearly established science, and to deny it is not a fruitful way to interact in the world and bridge the gap between faith and reason.’”

Yet trying to bridge that gap challenged her sense of identity. When one of her classes assigned *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis’ second encyclical – which calls for “swift and unified action” against climate change, and has no qualms about accepting the findings of science – she was struck by the text’s freedom from literalism. “Talking to my Catholic friends, I was shocked to learn that evolution didn’t conflict with their faith beliefs. People were just like, ‘OK, yeah, we always knew that it didn’t mean we couldn’t have our faith,’ and moved on. Meanwhile, I am in the trenches of this spiritual and intellectual battle over what is true. It was really a moment of crisis about something that didn’t need to be so intense, and I had really been led astray by many people in that sense.”


Barron doesn’t necessarily blame the people in her church for this because she thinks that they truly believed what they were teach-

ing her. But she does think that the community bears a responsibility to examine how they are indoctrinating their youth and also to ask themselves: “Is this battle against science and what is being taught in schools at the heart of our community, or is our battle to stand up for the vulnerable, to care for creation, and to be a community of love?”

Barron eventually worked her way out of her crisis by clinging to the latter. She also came to realize that the intricacies of nature and how it functioned could inspire her faith – not detract from it – and provoke a feeling of awe that is connected to her perception of God. This led to her climate activism. And her climate activism led her to realize just what an opportunity was being wasted by the evangelical denial of climate change. “This is a really intense community of people,” she says. “There are incredible opportunities to mobilize people who have grown up in an evangelical community where people get so fired up about the issues they care about.”

And actually, it’s not so difficult to envision creation care as one of those issues. At its core, Christianity is a sacrificial religion, calling on adherents to deny the pleasures of the flesh and cling to a belief in the unseen. At its core, climate action requires sacrifice, giving up certain conveniences for a higher cause, even if the outcome isn’t ensured or immediate. Many of the young Christian climate activists I talked with pray for their churches to harness their power in this way, rather than repudiate it. Many want their churches to see their climate action – their veganism and composting and phone banking and bike riding – as precisely how they are exercising the very moral compass they learned at church.

“That’s what I tell older church leaders,” Morris says. “‘Young people learn to care at church. You gave them the reasons to care, but then you didn’t support them or encourage them or give them outlets for that care – or you told them what they cared about was wrong.’”

At the end of the day, though, it’s that caring that keeps them coming back to the church. It’s that caring that makes them think that environmental action could restore not just the planet from without, but the church from within. “I could very easily move on from that part of my upbringing and say, ‘Y’all deal with it. You’ve sunk yourselves. Figure it out – or don’t, whatever,’” Van Donselaar says. “But I think I feel obligated to not abandon my upbringing. I want to honor those really good parts of growing up in the church and growing up with people who really deeply care about each other, about God, about creation, even if that looks differently than how I express it. To essentially call them to be better and say, ‘I’m the next generation. You taught me to love God. You taught me to care about justice. Let’s do it.’” 



GENERATION LIMBO

A year with the class of 2020,
which graduated into Covid-19
and a deep recession — and
had to put adult life on hold

BY EJ DICKSON

PHOTOGRAPH BY ALEC CASTILLO

LOCKED DOWN

Andrew Garcia-Bou at his
parents' home in Westchester
County, New York, photographed
through the window due to a
recent Covid-19 diagnosis

A

CCORDING TO MOST standards, Harkirat Anand did everything right. He went to one of the best schools in the country, Washington University in St. Louis. He focused on STEM fields, double-majoring in economics

and math. And when he finished his internship with a major telecommunications firm during his junior year, the company offered him a part-time position, all but guaranteeing him a full-time job the summer after he graduated. He worked diligently his senior year, forgoing hallmark experiences – 3 a.m. diner runs, dingy basement parties, regrettable hook-ups – in pursuit of a brighter future. “I thought it was a worthwhile trade-off, quite honestly,” he says. “I thought, ‘If this amounts to something, I’m OK making that sacrifice.’”

Then Covid-19 hit, and he heard nothing from the telecommunications firm for a month. “They totally ghosted me,” he says. When staffers finally got back in touch around April, they informed him that because of the pandemic, they were no longer filling the position. With nothing to do and nowhere to go except back home, with nearly 10 other family members, Anand, 22, fell into a deep depression. He gained weight and would stay in his room for days. “I became very reclusive and fell into despair for a while,” he says. “That all but paralyzed me.”

Anand is a member of the undergraduate class of 2020, one of the most star-crossed generations in recent history: born just a few years before 9/11, coming of age during the Great Recession, and leaving college during a global pandemic and an unprecedented attack on American democracy, with unemployment rates skyrocketing. They now face the seemingly insurmountable task of establishing careers and adult lives during a time when being an adult feels pretty much impossible for everyone.

From the very start of the pandemic, when classes were canceled and students kicked off campus, the class of 2020’s segue into the real world has been shaky at best. “When you leave college, [it’s] like, ‘What was the purpose of that? What did I take away from it?’” says Andrew Garcia-Bou, 23, a recent graduate of Bates College in Maine.

When I first began speaking to Garcia-Bou, he was living at his parents’ house in Westchester County, New York, hundreds of miles away from his girlfriend in Vermont; though he was unfailingly affable and decorous, it didn’t take long for his frustration at being deprived of his anticipated post-grad experience – an apartment in the city, a stable job, starting to pay off more than \$50,000 worth of student loans – to bubble over. “Like, yes, I gained an education,” he says. “But so much of it is the general social experiences and developing friendships and relationships.” He got a job in June, but continues to live at home, while his girlfriend has since moved to Boston; in early 2021, he was diagnosed with Covid-19.

Senior writer EJ DICKSON profiled Yamiche Alcindor in March’s “Women Shaping the Future” issue.



ON THE SIDELINES

Since the pandemic began, Lexi Torrence, who majored in journalism, has had to contend with a shrinking news industry, health problems, and a family glued to Fox News. “I feel helpless,” she says.

PHOTOGRAPH BY NICK THOMSEN

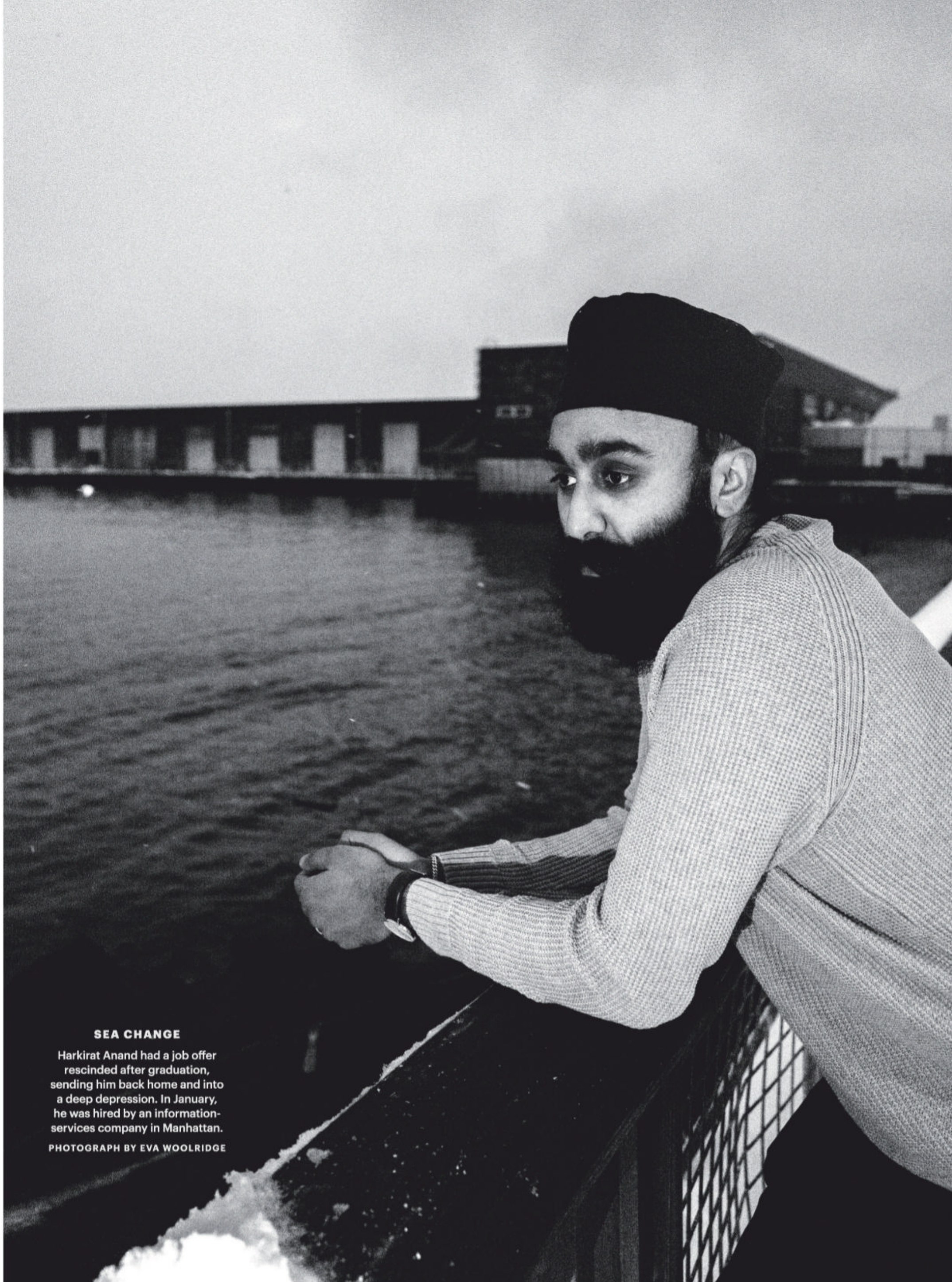
In an effort to understand their fears, concerns, and frustrations, over the past year *ROLLING STONE* has spoken with dozens of recent college graduates from all over the country and with varying racial and economic backgrounds, following up with a select few struggling to carve out a place in a stubbornly resistant job market. “The fact that this crisis is continuing to drag on and people are staying unemployed for longer doesn’t paint a good picture” for recent graduates, says AnnElizabeth Konkel, an economist for the job-listings website Indeed.com. Garcia-Bou puts it differently: For recent grads, “it just sucks.”

Generally speaking, the unemployment rate has been slowly but steadily declining since its peak last April, after the initial shock of lockdown. But the job market has far from reverted to its pre-pandemic state, particularly for people between the ages of 16 and 24: As of January 2021, the youth unemployment rate is 11.3 percent, still significantly above the 8.5 percent rate a year earlier. Part of the problem, ac-

cording to Konkel, is that there simply aren’t enough jobs out there for recent graduates. As of September 2020, Indeed.com postings for banking and marketing, fields that traditionally attract recent college graduates, are down 30 and 38 percent, respectively. Even internships, a standard method for young adults to enter their chosen industry, are down by 25 percent – despite clicks for internship postings being up 28 percent compared with 2019.

With so few jobs available and so many graduates looking for work, the climate is fiercely competitive. “I’d find an entry-level position and I’d see on LinkedIn ‘2,000 people applied in 18 hours,’” says Justin Grauer, a University of Miami graduate. “And I wouldn’t even apply because the chances of me getting an interview, let alone a job, are slim to none.”

“It’s just heartbreaking,” says Payton Pampinto, 23, of Muscle Shoals, Alabama. “I feel like I’m trying so hard. But employers will just ghost you. It’s like they don’t care.”



SEA CHANGE

Harkirat Anand had a job offer rescinded after graduation, sending him back home and into a deep depression. In January, he was hired by an information-services company in Manhattan.

PHOTOGRAPH BY EVA WOOLRIDGE

THE OBSTACLES facing recent college graduates during the pandemic don't just affect them in the short term. Prior research on graduates during recessions indicates that the effects of un- or under-employment for recent grads may linger eight to 10 years after graduation, says Stephanie Aaronson, VP and director of the economic studies program at the Brookings Institution. If jobs in their chosen field aren't available, many will take positions in other fields, which research has shown can have a long-term impact on their ability to gain a foothold in their desired industry.

"Your first job isn't usually your best job, but it's the way you make connections and learn what it means to be in the labor force. It's the thing that provides the springboard to your future success," Aaronson explains. "The concern is that it just could take longer, and the evidence shows that if you graduate into a recession, it takes longer to settle in and move up the career ladder."

To make matters worse, it is those who are already at a disadvantage – black, indigenous, people of color, and low-income recent graduates – who will likely be hardest hit. Previous data has found that black college graduates are twice as likely as their white peers to be unemployed, a trend that will likely be exacerbated by the pandemic. "I try not to think ahead too much just because it's kind of scary to wonder what anything looks like even a month from now, just the way this year has been going," Larisha Paul, a black NYU graduate and aspiring music writer who is unemployed and owes \$14,000 in student loans, told me in September. Currently, her only source of income is blogging for a music website for a few hundred dollars a month. "I just turned 22, and I'm already feeling very old," she says.

Because employers were by and large not hiring for entry-level jobs last summer, there's also been an increase in unpaid internship opportunities and companies asking for freelance projects on spec, which automatically serves as a barrier for low-income students, according to Dana Hamdan, an associate dean and executive director of the Career Development Center at Oberlin College. "Students who don't have these financial challenges are the ones securing these unpaid opportunities and in the long term are benefiting more," she says.

The end result is a sizable cohort of young people stranded at home, bored and alienated, with a multitude of qualifications and nothing to do with them. "We have all the degrees, all the knowledge, and we just cannot land a job," says Dean-Anna Gayle, 25, a Florida International University graduate. Last April, when I first started talking to Gayle, she was unemployed and living in Miami with her mother, a disabled veteran, and sister, after Geico revoked a job offer; she was applying to 10 jobs a day. "We're ready to work. We want to work. That's why we go to college,"

she says. "It's difficult to have all this knowledge and all this drive to work, and not be able to."

Gayle's readiness for the workforce was apparent even in our early Zoom interviews, where she was relentlessly professional, wearing office-ready button-downs and always referring to me as "ma'am." It was hard to understand why any prospective employer would not want to hire her for virtually any role.

It didn't take long for Gayle to get back on track – Geico hired her in May – but many college students who had job offers rescinded weren't so lucky. This has led to them feeling as if the ground beneath their feet had suddenly given way – leaving them stranded, with their lives abruptly put on hold. When she left the University of Alabama with a degree in marketing, Pampinto, the graduate from Muscle Shoals, was expecting to move to Palm Springs, California, to take a job as an events coordinator at an upscale hotel. After she graduated, the hotel kept

pushing back the start date – first by a few weeks, then by a few months. So she moved back home to live with her stepmom and dad, expecting it to be temporary. Six months into the pandemic, she got a call telling her she should start looking for other jobs.

"It's been terrible, really," she said in September of post-grad life. "You get your hopes up so much to start your own life. Now I'm just stuck at home seeing only my stepmom and my dad every single day. And it's just so tiring, even though I don't have much going on. I literally just sit in bed and message people on LinkedIn."

In February, Pampinto moved into an apartment in Atlanta with a roommate who lost her job during the pandemic, using money she'd saved up working at a bridal boutique and selling clothes on sites like Depop and Poshmark. When we last spoke in February, she was applying for nanny jobs and a position at SoulCycle. But she had given up hope on working in the events space, for which she had spent nearly four years in college studying to get her degree.

"I'm just scared," she told me. "I don't know how long this is gonna last and if things will ever go back to the same in the events industry. I don't know if I'll be able to do what I originally planned to do."

ALL OF THIS UNCERTAINTY is taking a toll on young people's mental health. In the U.S., nearly 75 percent of people between 18 and 24 are reporting at least one adverse mental-health condition, including depression and anxiety – more than twice the number of Gen Xers and baby boomers reporting such symptoms, according to CDC data. Crisis-outreach inquiries are also spiking. Taylor Mewhiney, 22, is a recent college graduate and a volunteer for a suicide-prevention hotline. She says she's seen an influx of calls from people her age. "They're very drained," she says. "They're not used to having no structure, no schedule, and a lot of people are teetering on the edge of ending their own lives."

Lexi Torrence, 22, is a soft-spoken University of South Carolina graduate who majored in journalism. Immediately after graduating, she moved into her boyfriend's one-bedroom apartment in Savannah, Georgia, and spent months fruitlessly hunting for editing and social media jobs. In August, after experiencing mysterious stomach pains, she had to have gallbladder surgery, but complications from the procedure forced her to go on bed rest, temporarily pausing her job search.

Torrence has also had to deal with the stress of having family members who are glued to Fox News and who, at the start of the lockdowns, regularly diminished the seriousness of Covid-19, a common narrative among recent graduates in the pandemic's early days. "I feel helpless. I feel like I can't do anything, physically or with my family and with the world and life," she said last spring.



READY FOR REAL LIFE

Dean-Anna Gayle's job at Geico was put on hold when the Covid-19 pandemic hit. "It's difficult to have all this drive to work and not be able to," she says.



“I’m the kind of person who likes to take charge and do stuff, and I feel like I can’t right now. I can’t make my family wear a mask or wash their hands. I feel like I’m teaching a class of toddlers that doesn’t want to listen.” (She says they have since come around on being vaccinated and they also accept that Biden legitimately won the election.)

Torrence’s life, she says, has been “derailed” by the pandemic. She is now freelancing for her hometown paper, getting \$20 per article. “All the control and all the plans I had for 2020 and 2021 fell through, and I had no way of stopping it,” she says. “I can’t stop myself from being sick. I can’t stop the pandemic. It’s just frustrating. I feel like I am more helpless than I’ve been since I was a kid.”

Such feelings of helplessness and malaise have contributed to recent graduates’ general sense of disillusionment toward their own alma maters, par-

ticularly career-services departments. Graduates (especially at large schools) often expressed their frustration with the paucity of resources available to them the second they graduated, as well as the uselessness of services like career-counseling departments. They felt that college was, in general, a rip-off, and they may very well be right: The average student-loan debt for the class of 2018, two years ahead of the class of 2020, was \$29,200, according to the Institute for College Access and Success.

“For graduates, there’s really no assistance. For current students, yes, but not for graduates,” says Gayle, the Florida International University graduate. “It’s basically like, ‘Here’s a job on Indeed,’ ‘Here’s a webinar.’ And that’s basically about it.”

Even those whose job is to help these individuals don’t find this an unfair perception, noting that their offered services – things like résumé writing and

interview prep – haven’t changed in decades. “These services only cater to the needs of affluent students who are already immersed in a thick supportive network and have completed an internship or two,” says Hamdan. “We need to offer programming that allows all students – and in particular less-affluent students – help.”

IN THE FIRST FEW months of the pandemic, in lieu of being able to find more traditional jobs, Hamdan says, many college students started volunteering and embarking in activism in order to give themselves a sense of purpose. Many became deeply involved in the Black Lives Matter movement and the protests against the killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor last summer. In the early months of

the pandemic, some focused on making PPE.

A NEW NORMAL

“I feel like I’m trying so hard,” says Payton Pampinto. “But employers will just ghost you.” Pampinto is living in Atlanta, paying rent with her savings, as she searches for work.


PHOTOGRAPH BY
ARI SKIN

For Anand, the WashU graduate, the killing of Floyd was a turning point. In the absence of a paying job, he decided to assume an activist role, doing pro-bono college consulting and tutoring individuals in marginalized communities. “There is something to be said about how institutional issues play into

a world where everyone is forced to sit and ponder these experiences without the distractions of the real world,” he says. “It gives our generation clarity to evaluate the situation and present solutions that are proactive.”

He started reevaluating what he could do with his off time and began exercising, losing 60 pounds. He also grew closer with his family, particularly his mother. “One day she just showed up at my door and grilled me on what was going on, and I broke down in her arms. I kinda cried and told her I was really in the shitter. She just sat there and listened,” he says. “She didn’t give me any advice, like she usually does, she just let me vent. She told me that my anxiety won’t disappear tomorrow and it’ll probably follow me around, but ‘Let’s work on getting you to a place where you feel better and can move forward.’”

Unlike many of the people I spoke to for this story, Anand has distinct memories of the post-9/11 ecosystem; as a Sikh American, he and his family faced discrimination in the wake of the attacks. For this reason, he feels he has a fairly unique view of what it’s like for a generation to be shaped by a single cataclysmic event. “I’m very aware that if one thing goes awry, things could fall apart,” he told me in February. “They’re very precarious as they stand.”

In January, however, Anand started a position at AlphaSights, an information-services company, in New York City. He has an apartment near Hudson Yards, though he plans to move back home to save money and help with his family’s mortgage. But a full-time job in New York had been his destination all along. It just took him a little longer to get there. “Everyone ultimately adjusts,” he says. “The fizz ultimately settles. Sure, this might be a new normal. But I don’t think we’re cosmically fucked.” 



RINGO STARR

ZOOM IN

Zoom In was recorded at Ringo Starr's home studio from April-October 2020.

The 5 new songs "**Here's To The Nights,**" "**Zoom In Zoom Out,**" "**Teach Me To Tango,**" "**Waiting for the Tide to Turn,**" and "**Not Enough Love In The World**"

include contributions from Paul McCartney, Joe Walsh, Ben Harper, Dave Grohl, Sheryl Crow, Chris Stapleton, Steve Lukather, Jenny Lewis, Lenny Kravitz, Corinne Bailey Rae, Eric Burton, Yola, FINNEAS, Benmont Tench, Robbie Krieger, Sam Hollander, Bruce Sugar & more.

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Reviews

Music

ERIC CHURCH MAKES IT A TRIPLE

The Nashville maverick delivers his biggest, boldest statement

By JONATHAN
BERNSTEIN



Eric Church

Heart & Soul

EMI

★★★★☆

ERIC CHURCH might look like a tough-guy outlaw who plays by his own rules, but his real gift has been for bending the rules to his will. No recent country artist has maneuvered the Nashville system as successfully, remaining dedicated to the power of down-the-center hitmaking even as he's helped expand the parameters of the genre to include everything from soft-rock balladry (2009's "Carolina") to U2-Metallica arena grandeur (2014's *The Outsiders*) to Wilco-referencing classic rock (2015's *Mr. Misunderstood*).

Church's latest project is his most ambitious: a 24-song triple album released over the course of a week in three segments. *Heart*, ➔

ILLUSTRATION BY
Tony Rodriguez



➔ ERIC CHURCH

&, and *Soul* further refine the melodic, mid-tempo storytelling Church excels at, offering a moving summation of what he has done well throughout his 15-year career. You get brash statements that recall his irreverent early days (“Stick That in Your Country Song”), as well as maximalist rock-and-soul like the Elton John-meets-Meat Loaf “Heart of the Night,” and the roots rock of “Hell of a View.”

Each of these albums has a loose premise (plenty of “heart” tunes on *Heart*, lots of R&B-leaning funk rock on *Soul*); taken together, *Heart & Soul* is a concept record of sorts, about the everlasting power of music – the music he makes and the music he loves, which spans the gamut from the Doors and Bobbie Gentry (“Rock and Roll Found Me”) to Elvis and Guns N’ Roses (“Heart on Fire”).

Church has always had fun paying respect to his heroes, going back to 2006’s “Pledge Allegiance to the Hag.” But the 43-year-old is now mythologizing his own music, with winking references. Some of the tension in “Russian Roulette” comes from the narrator’s desperation to find a “melody without a memory,” or, in other words, to avoid the type of music-as-nostalgia tune exemplified by his 2011 signature song “Springsteen” (“Funny how a melody sounds like a memory”). “Through My Ray-Bans” is a moving portrait of, well, attending an Eric Church concert (with a nod to his hit “Drink in My Hand”) that has a deeper meaning, having been inspired by Church’s experience playing at the 2017 Las Vegas festival (sight of America’s worst mass shooting).

Church’s clever self-consciousness provides a new edge, but that’s not always enough to set these records apart. Some songs, like “Crazyland,” which employs the technique of turning emotions into characters à la 2015’s “Kill a Word,” feel like retreads. That might be because Church has long relied on the same group of white-dude co-writers, and it may also be because he’s past the point in his career where innovation supersedes songcraft.

Regardless, on the best moments here, Church sounds newly invigorated. When, on “Doing Life With Me,” Church imagines himself as an aging troubadour counting his blessings, he saves what’s most important for near the end: “The notes and the words and the songs I sing.” **R**

GRETA’S GRAND ILLUSION

The classic-rock true-believers build a dazzling cathedral of neo-Zeppelin overkill By JON DOLAN

EVER SINCE the dawn of Jack White, artists who hunger to reassert the power of rock in a rockless age have tended to sound like reactionary young coots. But Greta Van Fleet, four kids from Saginaw, Michigan, set themselves apart by playing Seventies classic rock that seemed wholly unburdened

Steph Curry and LeBron James highlights.

Greta Van Fleet are just as guilelessly impassioned on their second record. You would think that maybe at this point they would have moved on to ripping off less obvious Zeppelin songs. Nope. Their stairway still goes directly to heaven; “Bro-

expect: “Heat Above” reimagines Cat Stevens as a strutting Planthead. The guitars on “Built by Nations” ape “Black Dog,” with extra Rust Belt grime, as frontman Joshua Kiszka’s voice shreds beyond his go-to Robert Plant/Geddy Lee impression toward something like an elven Bon Scott. The peak is “Stardust Chords,” opening with cavernous yowls and orc-march drums before vaulting into



by irony or even self-awareness. They just really, really liked making songs that sounded like Led Zeppelin (with some Rush thrown in there, too), and on their 2018 debut, *Anthem of the Peaceful Army*, they approached the ancient music that blew their minds just like kids at recess re-creating their favorite

ken Bells” bustles in your hedgerow with such gusto that it’s not hard to imagine GVF finding themselves on the business end of a whole lotta legal action.

But *The Battle at Garden’s Gate* isn’t just paint-by-numbers pantomime. They’re quite good at this bullshit, and not always in ways you’d

**Greta Van Fleet**

The Battle at Garden’s Gate

Republic

★★★★☆

dazzlingly inane prog-blues overkill.

Yet, while Greta Van Fleet excel at erecting houses of the retro-rock holy, they struggle a bit at the basics – like memorable songwriting, and especially lyrics; “My Way Soon” is a glorious sunburst of serpentine guitar attack and stringy-haired boogie recalling Free or Humble Pie, but it’s blandly undercut with wan wisdom like “I’ve seen many people/There are so many people/Some are much younger people, some are so old.” Speak, brother. And when the band goes a-court-ing, things can get icky: “Your mind is a stream of colors/Extending beyond our sky,” Kiszka offers, pitching philosophic woo over the dragon-tailed sensitivity of “Light My Love.” What lucky theoretical groupie in 1975 wouldn’t dig that?

With these guys, a little self-awareness would go a long way toward making them easier to take seriously. **R**

BREAKING**Dry Cleaning’s Pandemic Punk Epiphany**

BANDS AS COOL as London’s Dry Cleaning don’t come along often. After forming at a local karaoke night, they got band-to-watch hype for two alluring 2019 EPs. They began working on their full-length debut as lockdown set in, eventually finishing *New Long Leg* with veteran producer and PJ Harvey collaborator John Parish. The way vocalist Florence Shaw stoically speaks her lyrics over mordant post-punk can recall the Mekons or Black Box Recorder, with songs like “John Wick” or “Unsmart Lady” unfolding like mini mysteries. The result is a tension bordering on terror that perfectly fits our claustrophobic times. **JON DOLAN**



Quick Hits

Ten new albums you need to know about now



Serpentwithfeet

Deacon

Secretly Canadian



SWEET FEET The second LP from experimental pop artist Josiah Wise is a gorgeous meditation on black queer love, taking its slow, serene time en route to hymnlike romantic epiphany.

★★★★☆

Floating Points, Pharoah Sanders, and the London Symphony Orchestra

Promises

Luaka Bop



JAZZ TRIP Eighty-year-old sax great Sanders pushes his sound to its most heavenly extreme, with his murmuring lines hovering above producer Floating Points' ambient-classical shimmer.

★★★★☆

Tune-Yards

Sketchy

4AD



ART-POP ACE Merrill Garbus' body-rattling mutant New Wave is at once thrilling and decentering, but it's her incisive songwriting (see "Hold Yourself") that makes her fifth LP a treat.

★★★★☆

Matt Sweeney and Bonnie "Prince" Billy

Superwolves

Drag City



HOWLING WOLF Sixteen years after the first Superwolf collab, Matt Sweeney's artfully gnarled guitar lines are still an ideal match for Will Oldham's ancient-feeling warble and lyrics.

★★★★☆

Evanescence

The Bitter Truth

BMG



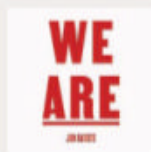
TRUTH HURTS The beloved goth-metal band returns to the bedrock sound that made it 2000s heroes, driven by singer Amy Lee's high-drama vocals and razor-sharp pop instincts.

★★★★☆

Jon Batiste

We Are

Verve



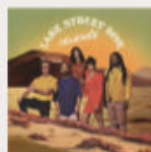
SOUL POWER The *Colbert* bandleader displays a rich soul vision, evoking Al Green, modern R&B, and New Orleans jazz, with assists from pals like Mavis Staples and Zadie Smith.

★★★★☆

Lake Street Dive

Obviously

Nonesuch



DEEP DIVE The increasingly limber roots-pop band eases even further into retro soul, which compensates for a few well-intentioned but clunky lyrics about climate change and politics.

★★★★☆

Merry Clayton

Beautiful Scars

Motown



SPIRITUAL HEALING The immortal rock backup vocalist (see the Stones' "Gimme Shelter") revisits her gospel past on this moving set of bruised spirituals and tender devotionals.

★★★★☆

Sting

Duets

Universal



DOUBLE TAKES Sting is in smooth sophisticate mode, sharing the mic with Mary J. Blige, Annie Lennox, Eric Clapton, and others on this generous collaborations album.

★★★★☆

Cheap Trick

In Another World

BMG



OLD TRICKS Cheap Trick still want you to want their Beatles- and Who-worshipping arena-rock throwbacks, but offer little worth hoisting a flame to on their 20th studio album.

★★★★☆

CONTRIBUTORS: JONATHAN BERNSTEIN, JON DOLAN, KORY GROW, CLAIRE SHAFFER, HANK SHTEAMER



COOPER & CRIB
MUSIC MANAGEMENT GROUP

SIX NEW TALENTED ARTISTS DMB SWERV, STREETCANNON, JOEY FRANKO, ELI ALLEN, VIANDRA AND LA BREA SIGN TO COOPER & CRIB MUSIC MANAGEMENT, OWNED BY CEO'S CHRISTINA COOPER AND JUSTIN "A2" CRIB WITH DORNELL "D-THREE" CRIB ASSISTING IN OPERATIONS AS COO. THE MANAGEMENT WAS CREATED IN 2021 AND HAS ALREADY BEEN FEATURED IN BILLBOARD MAGAZINE'S HOT 100 ISSUE, THE FRONT COVER OF ELLEMENTS MAGAZINE, IHEART RADIO, AND MORE! THEY ARE TAKING THE MUSIC INDUSTRY OVER BY STORM QUICK, AND PLAN TO ELEVATE THEIR ARTISTS EVEN HIGHER BY PLANNING A NATIONWIDE TOUR LATER THIS YEAR.



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@VIANDRADUNN

@THEREALLABREA

PHOTOGRAPHER: @BREEZYSHOTME



Coleman (left) and Rahim as a couple who take many prisoners

TV

LET'S DO THE TIME WARP AGAIN

Netflix's Seventies-set true-crime thriller 'The Serpent' is poisoned by the out-of-sequence storytelling trend



ALAN SEPINWALL

IT'S TEMPTING TO begin this review of *The Serpent* in the middle, offering a tidbit meant to tease your interest in the Netflix true-crime miniseries before bouncing back and forth in time to make the whole enterprise seem livelier. After all, that's how *The Serpent* creators have opted to tell this story, as has been the case with so many recent shows.

Too often, this out-of-sequence narrative device

comes across as a naked attempt to dress up a story that isn't that interesting to begin with. Or, it muddles a tale that would be more exciting told in order. With *The Serpent* – about serial killer Charles Sobhraj (Tahar Rahim), who preyed on Western tourists along the “Hippie Trail” of Thailand, Nepal, and India in the mid-Seventies – it's a bit of both. Parts of the story are so potent that they succeed despite the presentation, while others drag as this serpent loops around to swallow its own tail.

After a 1997-set prologue, the series lands in 1975 Bangkok, where Sobhraj, girlfriend Marie-Andrée Leclerc (Jenna Coleman), and henchman Ajay (Amesh Edireweera) are in the midst of their usual routine: posing as gem dealers so they can

lure guileless backpackers to rob and/or kill them. Their slaying of a Dutch couple, and the indifference of local authorities, forces diplomat Herman Knippenberg (Billy Howle) and his wife, Angela (Ellie Bamber), to become amateur detectives.

It's a straightforward suspense-thriller setup *The Serpent* can't stop itself from complicating. Soon, the story is unfolding across multiple timelines, with Knippenberg's investigation moving ahead in a straight line, while Sobhraj's crimes are presented in what can feel like an almost random order. There are chyrons to explain the date and location we've

just jumped to, but good luck following when certain events happen relative to others.

Scenes are often presented multiple times in different episodes, in theory to provide new context to what we previously saw. Coupled with Sobhraj's ritualized methods – he would poison his victims, making them sick

enough to depend on him for everything – it makes the story feel more monotonous than intended. Every serial killer has a routine, but this one is particularly unpleasant to sit through over and over, as we continually revisit the same poor suckers writhing in intestinal discomfort.

On occasion, the non-chronological approach provides greater illumination. But it mostly gets in the way, as in detailing how Leclerc evolves from unsuspecting love interest to semi-willing accomplice. *Doctor Who* alum Coleman is good enough to suggest an engrossing character arc had we followed Leclerc straight from the beginning to the end of her journey with Sobhraj, but it's hard to keep track of how complicit she's meant to be. Rahim, meanwhile, tries to keep Sobhraj – half-Indian, half-Vietnamese, and resentful of these rich Western kids – inscrutable. But the performance is too understated for its own good, given how much of the plot leans on the idea that Sobhraj's charismatic attentions felt to his victims, as one puts it, “like the sun shone on you.”

These stumbles weigh down the early hours of the eight-part miniseries. At a certain point, though, Herman and Angela begin making enough progress that *The Serpent* takes on an urgency befitting the atrocities committed by Sobhraj. Those later chapters are so tense, exciting, and occasionally touching that the periodic rewinds don't get in the way too much. The question is how many viewers will stick around for that payoff.

There are stories that are only effective because they're told out of order, like *Memento*, and others, like *Breaking Bad*, where the bending of time enhances a tale already expertly told. But too many creators lean on the gimmick as a crutch and, as in the case of *The Serpent*, keep tripping over it. ®

The Serpent

NETWORK	Netflix
STARRING	Tahar Rahim Jenna Coleman Billy Howle Ellie Bamber Amesh Edireweera Tim McInnerny

★★★☆☆



Howle and Bamber on the case

WATCH LIST

What to stream, what to skip this month



Pedrad (left)
in a school
daze as Chad

ABOUT A BOY

Chad

NETWORK TBS
AIR DATE April 6th
★☆☆☆☆

This comedy, in which *Saturday Night Live* alum Nasim Pedrad plays an Iranian American teenage boy, has been stuck in development for years. That gives the Pedrad-created series the awful timing to debut after two great seasons of Hulu's *Pen15*, whose adult stars play themselves as adolescent girls. But *Chad* would be unbearable even if it had the benefit of novelty. *Pen15* can be tough to sit through when it acknowledges just how awkward kids can be in middle school, but it ultimately has huge affection and empathy for its faux teens. *Chad*, on the other hand, seems to have nothing but contempt for its title character, who says and does the wrong thing in every situation, then finds ways to keep doing that again and again. Pedrad disappears into the role physically; too bad she can't stand to like Chad even a little.

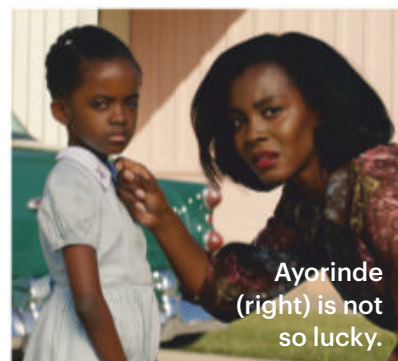
GHOST WORLD

Them: Covenant

NETWORK Amazon Prime
AIR DATE April 9th
★★★★☆

In the debut season of a new horror anthology series, African American couple Lucky (Deborah Ayorinde) and Henry (Ashley

Thomas) move with daughters Ruby (Shahadi Wright Joseph) and Gracie (Melody Hurd) into an all-white L.A. neighborhood in the Fifties — Compton, in fact, in the days before white flight. They're beset by both the racists next door (embodied by Alison Pill's Betty, whose creepy, un-wavering smile looks like it could shatter glass) and the various ghosts that seem to be lurking in the basement. It is, in other words, the plot of the haunted-



house installment of *Lovecraft Country*, only stretched from one episode to 10, with all of the padding that entails — including two separate episodes devoted to backstory. In individual moments, the fiery performances by Ayorinde and Thomas make the show as disturbing as required. But the story simply isn't built to last for so long, requiring creator Little Marvin and his collaborators to trowel on complications and extraneous subplots that wind up dulling its impact at the most potent and harrowing points. *Them* is also much stronger at depicting human monsters than the supernatural kind — the torment visited on the family by the Bet-tys of the world hits harder than the dangers posed by things that go bump in the night.

SON ALSO RISES

Invincible

NETWORK Amazon Prime
AIR DATE New episodes on Fridays
★★★★★

Powerful teenage sons of super-heroes are big on TV, first with the CW's *Superman & Lois* and now with *Walking Dead* creator Robert Kirkman's animated adaptation of his long-running comic. This one's told from the point of view of the title character, a.k.a. Mark Grayson (Steven Yeun), whose father is the revered Omni-Man (J.K. Simmons). What starts out as a familiar story of a kid following dad into the family business soon gets thorny with twists. *Invincible* often seems confused about whether it wants to be an upbeat, all-ages adventure or something much darker, thanks to frequent profanity and excessive gore. (That's as



far as things go, maturity-wise.) But the clean, bright visual style and the performances by Yeun, Simmons, and Sandra Oh are all winning. While shopping for a costume, Mark tells his father's tailor, Art (Mark Hamill), that he wants something iconic; Art replies that's "tough as hell to pull off." *Invincible* isn't quite iconic yet, but it has its charms. **A.S.**



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Movies

ESSAY

A 'Justice League' of His Own

'The Snyder cut' is finally here – and it's a radical revision of the all-star DC superhero flop

By K. AUSTIN COLLINS

THE POSSESSIVE in the title says it all: It is *Zack Snyder's Justice League*. This rerelease of 2017's disappointing all-star DC superhero team-up is not merely "the Snyder cut," as it has been called by both rabid fans and suspicious nonbelievers, all of whom doubted we'd ever see such a thing. The difference between the nearly four-hour cut that premiered



Snyder directing Momoa and crew on the set

on HBO Max and the beleaguered theatrical version (completed by the similarly beleaguered Joss Whedon) we saw almost four years ago is not merely cosmetic. Nor is it the kind of restoration and reordering of missing scenes usually implied by the term

"director's cut." This is a director unmistakably reclaiming his territory.

It should be remembered that it was Warner Bros. – the same company now shelling out \$70 million for these upgrades – whose uncertainty over the future of the DC Extended Universe after the failure of *Batman v. Superman* kick-started the conflicts that landed us here in the first place. Before a personal tragedy in Snyder's life made his leaving the project final, the studio's uncertainty over his vision made hiring Whedon a viable cleanup man. He was, after all, the director of the first *Avengers* movie – and Snyder's vision of the superhero template is as heavy, grandiose, and self-contained as the MCU's template

was pliable and comparatively light on its feet, an extensive and canny exercise in franchise management. Snyder's films have often made it harder to imagine where one might go from here. Where do you go once, as in *Batman v. Superman*, you've killed off Superman?

But that isn't to say that the Man of Steel and his fellow major Leaguers aren't given their due in this new version. That's the supreme irony here: More than the 2017 cut (or even any of the massive *Avengers* movies), *Zack Snyder's Justice League* makes a strong case for most everyone on its team of titular heroes. This is true most of all for Ezra Miller's *Flash*, Jason Momoa's *Aquaman*, and – by a significant mar-

AND JUSTICE FOR ALL

Cyborg, the Flash, Batman, Superman, Wonder Woman, and Aquaman fight to save the world and their director's vision.



gin – Ray Fisher’s Cyborg, who in this new cut is practically the emotional core of the story: a man whose traumatic past is now fully fleshed out and whose powers are elaborated upon in some of the movie’s most riveting and intricate scenes.

Justice League 2.0 renders Cyborg into something closer to the Dr. Manhattan of *Watchmen*: a knows-it-all, seen-it-all supreme being whose superpowers are the result of a catastrophic mistake, and whose lens on the world is thus somewhat grimmer for it. More room for Cyborg also results in a larger role for Joe Morton, as his father, the head of S.T.A.R. Labs – another context that gets adequate elaboration. This, more than almost any other addition, accounts for the enlarged scope of the movie. It also opens the door to more questions about Whedon’s cut of the film. How does what may have been a central storyline – not least the storyline involving the film’s black character – get reduced to ashes?

To say that the residue of the larger project was already apparent from the Whedon version is to drastically understate the case. Then again, Snyder has four hours to play with. He does

not use every minute of that run time wisely. Past errors are repeated; the brash, conclusory battle scenes feel just as compulsory and nonsensically destructive as they have in his previous films. But even this makes more sense than it used to. It fits with Snyder’s boyish amazement at the totality of these superheroes and what they’re capable of – a quality that has tended to set his films apart from the more grounded Marvel output, in which big, totalizing things tend to happen, but the more important threads feel interpersonal. *Black Panther* wouldn’t be nearly as effective without the ideological clashes at its center. Nor would the *Iron Man* trilogy be as charismatic were it any less a vehicle for Robert Downey Jr. to Downey us half to death.

There’s little to worship in these Marvel films, beyond the pitch-perfectness of Chris Evans playing a guy called Captain America, whereas Snyder’s movies are all worship, all the time. And the new *Justice League* arrives with a stark, clarifying sense of vindication reinserted into the mix, no matter how good or bad it is (and it certainly offers a bit of both). The basics of the plot are the same.

More than the 2017 original, Snyder’s ‘Justice League’ makes a strong case for its team of superheroes.

We still have the Mother Boxes and Steppenwolf (though you do get a greater sense of where he fits in the rankings of Bad Guys Trying to Destroy the World, which is not very high). It’s still a film with an opening stretch devoted to the meet-and-greet mechanics it takes to get the gang together. And it all still hinges on bringing Superman back to life.

It’s Clark Kent’s death that kicks off the plot, and we see the way that Superman’s dying shout echoes through land and sea, stirring that evil awake. We see the ways that otherwise historically warring tribes – the Atlanteans, the Amazons, the race of men – all become attuned to that cry. It’s an opening gesture that has the effect of saying this matters. Compare that with the fleet-footed first act of the 2017 film, in which much of our sense of these stakes is mentioned but not literalized onscreen, and you’ll know, within minutes, what sets Snyder’s film apart.

This doesn’t make the movie great. But there’s much to be said for a *Justice League* that feels more genuine. Rather than being a studio-bred mash-up of competing intentions, the new cut is a Frankenstein’s monster of most every element of its original director’s style. Scenes of the embattled Amazons taking on the cosmically silly Steppenwolf have the bronzed, slo-mo, sculptural intensity of Snyder’s gladiatorial epic *300*. The humor so falsely injected into the grimly serious world of the movie has been pared back. The Flash, for example, is far less of a jitterbug; when Batman first sneaks into his hangout, we no longer see K-pop playing on Barry Allen’s TV monitors. He’s no longer reduced to being an asocial nerd. If anyone is reduced, it’s Bruce Wayne – to his bank account.

Fans were immediately suspicious of Whedon’s version because its sensibility was so conspicuously severed from Snyder’s vision. No, the new *Justice League* is not exactly a slam dunk, and a coda drops us right into the territory that, one senses, Warner was trying to avoid. (Remember that alien dream Batman had in *Batman v. Superman*? Well, get ready.) Yes, Snyder overplays his hand here. But it’s most definitely the more compelling hand. 🦹



[Cont. from 31] shakes his head in disbelief. “And this president and governor, in the middle of all this shit, want to come to the heart of the Black Hills, to a place that has a deep history of injustice and racism, to spew bullshit. It was white supremacy.”

Tilsen’s parents met at a protest, and he remembers marching for justice as a little boy with Hot Wheels clenched in his hands. It’s in his blood, and he didn’t plan on protesting Trump in a half-assed way. Tilsen notified local police where and when they were going to protest. Tilsen thought they had reached an understanding, but on the morning of Trump’s speech he saw that Noem had approved calling in the National Guard at the urging of local police.

Tilsen had about 200 protesters; some were heckled by Trump supporters shouting “Go back to where you came from.” Still, it wasn’t something that Tilsen had not experienced before. He was surprised, however, when the police declared their gathering unlawful and the National Guard moved in.

“They were not even trained,” says Tilsen. “They weren’t using their shields for protection, but bashing them around like weapons. I’ve never been at a protest where they are actually swinging their shields.”

In the resulting melee, Tilsen says, he grabbed one of the shields to prevent it from smashing his head. The protesters retreated, and Tilsen wrote “Land Back” on the shield. He was then arrested and transported to the Pennington County Jail. Tilsen says he noticed two things at the jail: Everyone incarcerated was Native American, and there were no masks. Still, he thought he would be quickly released. Instead, he was held for three and a half days and charged with four felonies.

“I was sitting there and going, ‘Holy shit, they were ready for this,’” he says. “This was Kristi Noem saying, ‘I told you I’d have the guts to call out the National Guard on these Indians.’ She’d been wanting to, and this was the right opportunity.”

Tilsen’s trial date is set for April. He says he’ll opt for a jury trial before he takes a plea with jail time.

A footnote: Two months after Tilsen’s arrest, South Dakota Attorney General Jason Ravnsborg veered out of his driving lane near Pierre and killed a pedestrian. He claimed for the first 12 hours after the accident that he thought he’d hit a deer. This claim seemed dubious when the dead man’s glasses were found inside Ravnsborg’s car, presumably flying in when he hit the windshield. After a five-month investigation, Noem called for Ravnsborg’s resignation and he was charged with three misdemeanors with a possible 90 days in jail.

Tilsen? He faces up to 16 and a half years.

DURING THE FALL CAMPAIGN, Trump supporters often could be seen waving flags saying “Fuck Your Feelings.” Noem has adapted a more telegenic take on the slogan that has inevitably trickled down to her citizens. While South Dakota’s reservations have a “We’re all in this together” feel, the rest of the state is more self-absorbed.

One night I stop at the decidedly misnamed Cheers Lounge. As MMA bouts play on the television, karaoke is in process. There are duets and a drunken old man singing Merle Haggard’s “Swinging Doors.” I nurse a vodka tonic, when a kind old woman comes over to my table. She points at my mask and addresses me in a South Dakota nice voice.

“Honey, you don’t need to wear that in here.”

She’s probably 65 or 70, so I hope she is at the top of the vaccine list.

The next morning, I seek the soothing waters of the Watiki Water Park, where hundreds of kids and their unmasked parents lounge in tepid, humid waters. Spotting my mask, notepad, and fogged glasses, a parent shouts at me: “It’s winter, what the hell else are we supposed to do with our children?”

Covid aside, this is the upside of the Noem approach. The park closed for a month when the pandemic began, but since then has been running at full throttle. Currently, the park is adding 20 more tables where parents can drink beers while the kids splash away. Business is booming, and that isn’t by accident. The park has been targeting tourists within a 500-mile drive.

Watiki is just doing God’s work. “I have people from Texas and California coming up to me and saying, ‘Thank you for being open and being somewhere I can bring my family,’” a staffer tells me. Another asks me if I need a towel.

Thanks, but I won’t be staying.

A WEEK LATER, I remember that Noem said those not comfortable with her maskless land could stay home. I take her advice and gas up my car.

Much had transpired over the winter. No mask mandate came out of Pierre, but the budget did include a request for \$5 million to buy Noem a new plane. It was scuttled by the predominantly Republican Legislature after it emerged that Noem had used the existing state plane for travel to political events. On the one-year anniversary of the pandemic, Noem wrote an op-ed for Fox claiming only 1,690 South Dakotans had died rather than the widely accepted number of more than 1,900. Her administration used the statistical sleight of hand of counting only those whose deaths were “caused” by Covid, not those who died with Covid. With that clever accounting, the Noem Administration magically reduced Covid-related deaths by more than 11 percent.

Her star was ascending in Republican circles with the Mar-a-Lago fundraiser and an appearance at the Conservative Political Action Committee’s annual event. The news that Lewandowski would helm Trump’s PAC was another good sign. At CPAC, Noem wore the same sleeveless red dress that she wore at Rushmore. “Let me be clear, Covid didn’t crush the economy,” said Noem. “The government crushed the economy.” Later she added, “I don’t know if you agree, but Dr. Fauci is wrong a lot.” That brought her a standing ovation. At the souvenir stand, Lewandowski was spotted holding a poster of Noem in a cowboy hat, staring into the far distance under the words “America’s Governor.”

Still, something essential is missing from her act. Noem is not a beguiling or charismatic public speaker. Nor has she exhibited an ability to go into full-rage mode like Trump. If she is going to keep the MAGA crowd entertained, that has to improve. “She’s learning the Trump language and using social media to go after people,” says Miller. “But her performance at CPAC was robotic. Maybe she’ll get better with time.”

I leave Sioux Falls and head west. I stop for coffee at Wall Drug, and take a loop around Mitchell’s Corn Palace, two of South Dakota’s pre-Covid charm factories. I think about Noem and how her quest for greatness and the Trumpian twisting of facts have given her citizens the false sense that all is well. Numbers are currently down and vaccines are being distributed, but who knows how she will handle a poten-

tial third wave with a more virulent variant? Actually, we do know.

Tonight, there are more public events to hold and more people to make sick. I pass Rapid City and the Rushmore Plaza Civic Center, where the governor is hosting the annual Black Hills Stock Show and Rodeo. There are hundreds of cowboy hats and few masks. Noem waves and the crowd rises to its feet. The PA announcer shouts into his mic, “I wish there were 50 governors like [we have] here.”

I do the per-capita math in my head and figure if we had 50 Noems we’d have another 200,000 dead.

I drive on for an hour through a snow squall before turning off for Deadwood. The onetime gold-rush town is now known best as the source material for Al Swearengen’s 279 utterances of “cocksucker” during *Deadwood*’s three-season run on HBO. It is now a frontier-village theme park; there’s the Swearengen Inn and tacky-tacky shops where you can pose your baby dressed up as, I don’t know, a Deadwood-era baby? I’m looking for Saloon #10, the direct descendant of the bar where gunslinger Wild Bill Hickok took a bullet in the back of the head while holding a pair of eights and aces.

Or so they say. Much of Hickok’s legend was self-invented by a man who changed his name three times. Did he shoot some bad men? Probably. Did he shoot good men in the back for spite? Most definitely. It all fits. Deadwood is the ultimate print-the-legend town in a state ruled by a magical-realism governor.

I walk through the doors and, like Hickok, take a seat with my back to the door. Deadwood is corona convenient – five states are within a 90-minute drive. But nowhere is as virus-brave as Saloon #10, where men toss darts, drunkenly tackle one another in front of their delighted women, and play poker until they are broke. All before 9 p.m. The sawdust on the floor, originally placed there to soak up blood, probably doesn’t work as efficiently against the coronavirus.

I carve out a two-bar-seat safety zone and protect it like an ancient Deadwooder would guard his claim. I ask Cal, the bartender, about business. He has worked here for more than a decade.

“Never better,” says Cal, his long beard flecked with beer suds. “And I mean never better. Ever.”

I go back to my no-Covid zone and search my phone for a hotel room, until a man in a cowboy hat interrupts me. “Do you mind if my wife takes that empty seat?” He asks in a way that is less asking and more telling. I may talk a good Covid game, but when challenged I cave like a spineless jellyfish.

“Sure.”

But the man has tricked me. Instead of his wife, a toothpick-chewing, six-foot-four-inch, 300-pound dude shows up 10 minutes later and wedges himself onto the barstool and orders a Diet Coke.

The first guy shrugs.

“He’s prettier than my wife.”

And they laugh with a cowboy crescendo that you would see only on, well, *Deadwood*. His giant friend is closer to me than I allow my own kin. I say a prayer for both of their wives. Giant guy sizes me up.

“You don’t seem to be having a good time. What’s the matter, brother?” He eyes my mask. “You think that is going to protect you?” He looks at his buddy and grins.

I get my burger to go. I drive on icy state Route 99, heading out of town. I slow when I see a sign that is often placed on the sites of South Dakota highway fatalities. Like much of South Dakota, the sign is brutal and to the point: “WHY DIE?”

Only the Snow Queen can answer that one. ®

➔ CLIMATE CRISIS: DEMOCRATS

[Cont. from 56] If they again put their hopes in Republican hands, the answer is almost certainly no. “The reality is that the Obama administration desperately wanted bipartisan support for everything that they did. Unfortunately, that’s like waiting for Godot. It never shows up,” Markey says. “Today, people reflect upon what happened, and they realize that the Republicans will drag out each negotiating process for as long as they can, and then ultimately not be there with sufficient numbers in the end.”

The risk of going it alone with such a narrow majority, however, is that Democrats will eschew sweeping changes and instead aim for incremental reforms that have a better chance of succeeding. That may be easier politically, but it’s a compromise the planet cannot afford, says Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse, a leader in the Democratic Party’s climate push. “Nature has told us what the test is,” he says, “and if we make all the politicians and all the groups happy but don’t pass that test, then we flunk.”

Hoping to succeed this time, Democrats are revisiting their last effort and changing, well, almost everything. For starters, they’ve recognized they need to talk more about what their climate plans can *do* for people, rather than how they work. “I think we sort of talked ourselves into thinking, ‘Boy, we can point to this great policy mechanism,’ rather than leading with all the great things that are going to happen if we address climate change in this country,” says Keohane, the Environmental Defense Fund economist. “It was sort of like we were leading with our chin.”

This time around, lawmakers are leaving behind the Obama-era obsession with free markets and adopting climate plans that better align with a more diverse and progressive movement that sees protecting the climate as part of a broader effort toward environmental, economic, and racial justice. Markey, a 74-year-old senator who first came to Congress almost 50 years ago, has adopted the language of a new generation of activists to talk about the current climate movement, saying it’s bolstered by “intersectional activism from Black Lives Matter, the Sunrise Movement, Indivisible, indigenous and native organizations, and peace groups, who are going to be pushing leaders to be as ambitious as possible.”

Democrats are also not pinning all their hopes to a single, do-or-die stand-alone climate bill this time, but rather looking to infuse climate provisions across their legislative agenda. “Anybody who is serious will get their stuff ready and just look for opportunity,” says one congressional staffer. In December, Democrats managed to pass \$35 billion in funding for renewable energy, including a plan for the EPA to phase out hydrofluorocarbons, a potent greenhouse gas. It was one of the most significant legislative windfalls for green energy in the nation’s history, and it wasn’t even the headliner of the legislation, which was principally about Covid relief. Keeping climate out of the headlines can help bills pass with a bipartisan vote, says the staffer. His dream scenario for a climate bill is that “it goes through just getting a story on page A-6 of *The Washington Post* on the day it’s enacted – and never before and never after.”

One of the first big opportunities for Democrats during this Congress is the infrastructure bill they plan to push later this spring. The details are still being worked out, but what’s taking shape is effectively a domestic Marshall Plan – both for workers and the climate. In the package, Democrats hope

to beef up the nation’s aging power grid; mandate utilities to rapidly transition from fossil fuels to carbon-neutral sources of electricity; expand public transit and high-speed rail; fund the infrastructure needed for an all-electric vehicle fleet; and make a massive investment in green energy and green jobs.

Democrats would welcome GOP support for their agenda, but they’ve made clear that they’re going forward one way or another. In practice, that means passing legislation through reconciliation, a provision in the Senate’s byzantine procedural code that allows some measures to pass with a simple majority – rather than the typical 60 votes needed to beat a filibuster. But even with reconciliation, Democrats would still need their full caucus on board, including Manchin. Democrats can build that support by making the benefits of climate action obvious and spread them everywhere, says Faiz Shakir, who managed Bernie Sanders’ 2020 presidential campaign: “One of the most powerful ways that FDR’s New Deal operated was that it thought about projects in every congressional district in America, and I think that that’s the way we should be thinking as we do green infrastructure investments and green jobs.”

They’ll also have to rebuild credibility with people who’ve suffered under past policies supported by Republicans and Democrats alike. “If you are a coal miner and you are being told, ‘Oh, there will be a nice job after five years of a just transition in the renewable sector,’ you would understandably be skeptical, because your experience over the last 20 or 30 years has been that when politicians promised that there would be jobs after outsourcing occurred in America, there weren’t jobs,” Shakir says.

But even the best-constructed climate plan is going to come under assault from Republicans, most of whom continue to be in thrall to fossil-fuel interests and to Donald Trump, who spent four years doing everything he could to ensure oil-and-gas dominance and strangling any last vestiges of climate sanity from the party. To beat that, climate advocates are openly depending on what they say is the biggest change this time around: The public is demanding climate action in a way it never has before.

A decade ago, Americans as a whole were in favor of climate action, but they didn’t feel particularly strongly about it. When surveyed, the issue consistently ranked near the bottom on their list of priorities. That was part of what drove Democrats in 2010 to beg for industry support in their bid to attract moderate lawmakers. They needed cover from the middle, because they lacked a groundswell from an organized grassroots effort, which can demand action and impose political consequences on lawmakers who refuse to take it.

A decade of climate horrors, combined with a resurgent progressive wing of the Democratic Party that has rallied around a Green New Deal, has changed all that. Climate consistently polls at or near the top of the list for Democrats, particularly young ones. Vocal efforts from groups like the Sunrise Movement have already yielded dividends: They pushed Biden to campaign on climate, and he launched his presidency with a slew of pro-climate executive actions.

Markey says the strength of the climate movement – and lawmakers’ willingness to listen to it – could be the critical difference from last time. “The Waxman-Markey bill was an inside-out effort, born of a congressional timeline that demanded we move quickly,” Markey says. “Now, we have an outside-in force with the movement of engaged and mobilized young people. Now, we have an army.” ®



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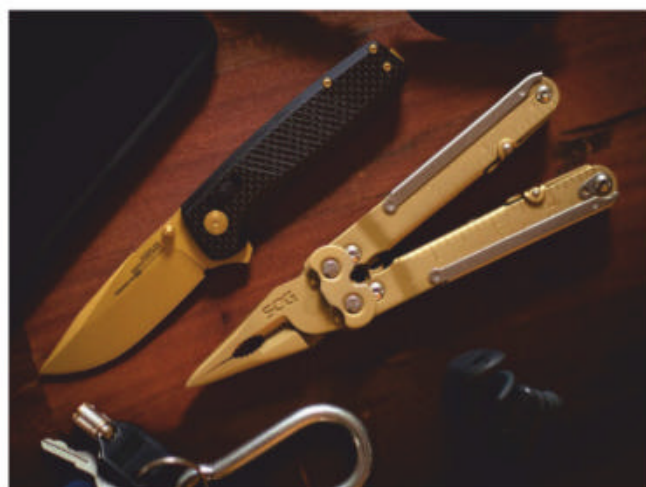
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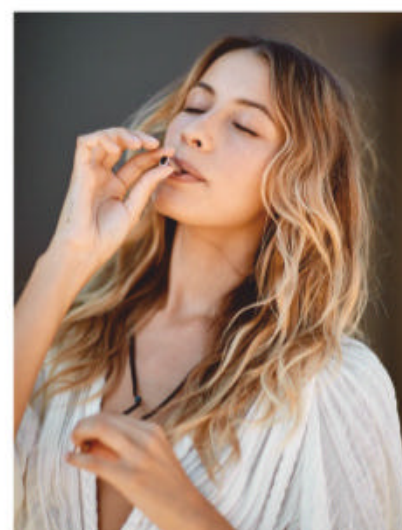


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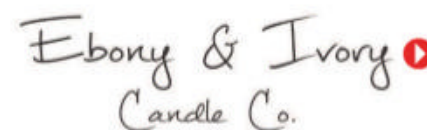
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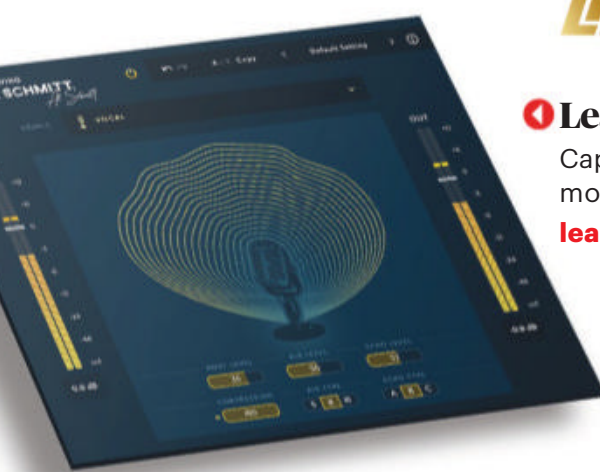
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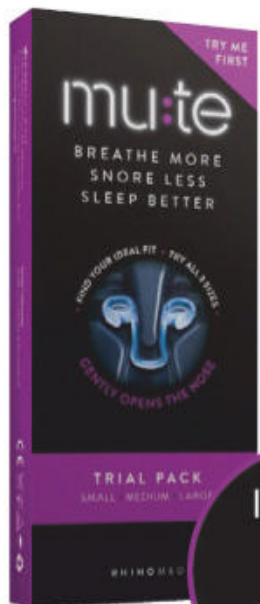


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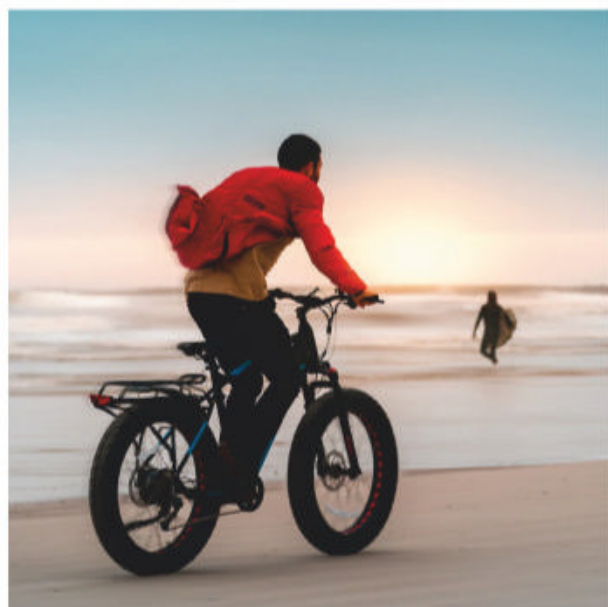
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Robert Redford

The acting legend on his climate activism and lifelong search for the truth

You've said that as a longtime environmental activist, you've become more radicalized over time. Was there a moment when you began to understand that what was happening to our planet was more serious than you'd realized?

I was attending a conference in Denver, in 1989, where there was a presentation by two scientists who explained Earth's temperatures were rising – they called it global warming. They explained what would happen if we ignored this threat. That moment was my wake-up call. I knew they were speaking the truth. Because one thing we've learned is that time waits for no one. I realized that when there's something you have to do, you better act, and act quickly.

Where does your connection to nature come from?

Well, I think it had to do with a trip that my mom took me on, many years ago. I was born and raised in L.A. – I was kind of rooted in that place. So my mom decided to take me on a cross-country trip, and she drove me to Yosemite National Park. We went through that long tunnel when you come out of Fresno, and when I came out of the other side, I was suddenly sitting on this precipice looking out on this valley. I thought, "God, this is amazing. I don't want to be standing here looking at it, I want to be *in it*." So I got a job at Yosemite National Lodge waiting on tables, and that's

what took me into the belly of the beast.

Having been someone who spoke up about environmental concerns very early on, how have you seen the movement change over the years?

People have become far more aware of the issues we face. Unfortunately, people who deny climate change also have stronger voices and are usually in positions of power. We've had to live with what's happened over the last four years, where the attitude about the environment was so strictly negative. That caused so much damage – it's like a road that needs repairing. We have to repair it quickly. Climate change is happening now, full time. No more denying.

Are you more or less optimistic now about our ability to fight these environmental disasters?

I'm more optimistic than ever. My optimism comes from seeing young people because they're inspired, they're engaged, and they're passionate – they're like a new group. They understand that the future is in their hands, and we've got to support them.

Do you think that Biden re-entering the U.S. into the Paris climate agreement is a step in the right direction?

I think Biden's a bright guy, and I think he's put together an incredible team, with [National Climate Adviser] Gina McCarthy and [Special Presidential Envoy for Climate] John Kerry. There's more that



"The last four years, where the attitude about the environment was so strictly negative... caused so much damage. We have to repair it quickly. Climate change is happening now, full time. No more denying."

needs to be done, certainly, but I feel like they're the people to do it.

You helped bring *All the President's Men* to the screen as a producer, as well as starring in it. What do you think that film can tell us about what the nation went through over the past few years?

That history has a tendency to repeat itself. I was attracted to the story about two journalists who were searching for the truth. And that was the story I wanted to tell. It wasn't about Watergate, really. It was about journalism and truth.

Who are your personal heroes and why?

[Marine biologist] Rachel Carson, because she was an early advocate for nature. Jacques Cousteau, who was one of the first to open up the world to life within the ocean. And finally, and I

can't emphasize this enough because we're talking about who's current, Bill Gates. I'm very, very encouraged by his commitment to finding solutions with the challenges we face. He's committed his time and money – let's not forget that – to this cause.

What advice do you wish you could pass on to your younger self?

"Why did you ever get into this?" [Laughs.] To be serious about it, I'd probably say always look for the truth, even though truths can be elusive. I'm always inspired by the words of T.S. Eliot: "For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business." So maybe, "Just follow your instincts and keep searching for the truth."

Looking for the truth seems to be a constant thread through your career. I think so. But you said that, I didn't. [Laughs.] DAVID FEAR

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